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Cross-Asset Dispatches

Cross-Asset Allocation Thoughts Across Iran Scenarios

With the conflict in the Middle East and oil price spike, we lay out how we're thinking about multi-asset portfolios across various scenarios.

Key Takeaways

- Supply-driven energy shock – even if geopolitical risks fade in the medium term – can lead to markets pricing for inflation persistence even as growth drags, returning us to a backdrop like 2022-2023 when bond-stock correlations broke and cash was king.
- A more prolonged energy shock would call for the recession playbook, but timing of when to turn defensive would be tricky as inflation remains the main concern.
- Across all scenarios, our preference for US assets (except IG corporates) stand, given their more defensive nature and better fundamentals.

Exhibit 1: Scenarios and cross-asset impact

Scenario	Note	Brent Impact	Cross-Asset Impact
De-escalation	Full flow of traffic within 1-2 weeks	\$65-70/bbl	Risk assets continue to outperform; volatility can stay elevated as markets weigh further geopolitical flare-ups
Ongoing constraints	80% of tanker flow returns within 1-2 weeks, another 1-2 months before it returns to 100%	\$90/bbl	Risk assets still outperform but returns are tepid; equities look through inflationary shock as temporary; rates vol stays elevated vs. equity vol; equity-bond returns correlations break down
Effective closure	Effective closure remains for 4-5 weeks or longer, demand destruction necessary to rebalance market	\$120-130/bbl	Bonds outperform as central banks prioritize labor market risks; equities underperform amid weaker growth, but sequencing matters

Source: Morgan Stanley Research

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Cross-Asset Allocation Thoughts Across Iran Scenarios

The below contains excerpts from [Global Economic Briefing: Energy Shocks in the Economy & Markets \(6 Mar 2026\)](#) and [Cross-Asset Dispatches: Will Higher Oil Break Correlations \(Again\)? \(5 Mar 2026\)](#)

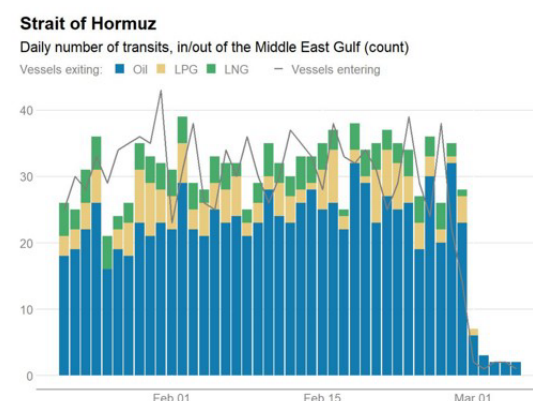
With the fresh bouts of volatility on the back of heightened geopolitical tension in the Middle East, we lay out our cross-asset core views across various probable scenarios.

Period	Bear	Base	Bull
2Q26	70	80	100
3Q26	60	70	100
4Q26	55	65	90
1Q27	55	65	90
2Q27	55	65	90
3Q27	55	65	90
4Q27	55	65	90

Source: Morgan Stanley Research

tant for gauging downside risks and hedging decisions at a time of developments in the Middle East over the weekend, our oil price target for our near-term target range to \$70-100/bbl by 2Q26, and our view that **risks around the globe have already been highlighting how an oil price shock in Iran can feed through to stagflationary pressures** - see [here](#), for some examples.

Exhibit 3: Higher prices are driven by a sharp slowdown in oil shipments



Source: Vortexa, Morgan Stanley Research

Thinking through Iran scenarios

While our base case has been that broadening global growth will support a broadening global equities rally, and that the US is our preferred region across most assets, the question is how much the conflict in Iran and market volatility could make sentiment more bullish or bearish on risk. **Historically, there tends to be volatility on the day or week of the start of geopolitical risk events** (see [Appendix: Market Performance Around Geopolitical Events](#)) but fundamentals tend to reassert themselves over the medium to long run, and there's no clear pattern on asset-class performance coming out of these episodes. **The main exception is Brent, where fundamentals can be driven by geopolitical events** via impacts on demand-supply imbalances, which in turn have knock-on effects on macro, which in turn have knock-on effects on asset class returns, which in turn have knock-on implications for multi-asset allocation.

Below, we lay out probable scenarios for the conflict in Iran from our US Public Policy team, based on how our oil strategist sees the skew of risks. See [Global Economic Briefing: Energy Shocks in the Economy & Markets \(6 Mar 2026\)](#) for more.

De-escalation

- Rapid containment, shipping lanes remain open, geopolitical risk premium unwinds
- Full flow of traffic within 1-2 weeks
- Brent at \$65-70/bbl, with markets pricing out geopolitical risk premium of ~\$7-9/bbl
- Little to no impact on global economy

Under this scenario where shocks to oil prices will likely be temporary, our base case for risky assets outperforming remains intact. Solid macro fundamentals reassert themselves, and investors go back to focusing on 'micro' stories like AI-capex and disruption, or fiscal policy in Japan. While stocks may rebound in relief, corporate credit will continue to be weighed down by heavy hyperscaler- and M&A-related issuance; in fact, the more markets discount growth risks in a negotiated outcome scenario, the more likely US IG corporate credit supply is to remain strong. Volatility in general can stay elevated for longer as markets try to gauge the probability of more geopolitical risk flare-ups, although VIX has been trending upwards since late December, anyway.

Allocation in this scenario: OW equities, EW government bonds, UW corporate credit, UW cash.

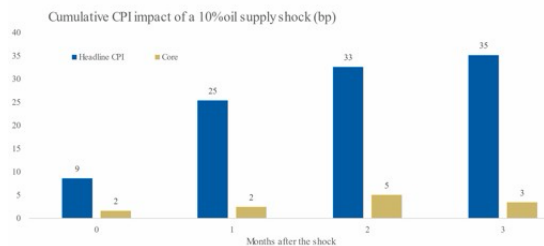
Ongoing constraints

- Fleet productivity shock; logistic disruption without production loss
- 80% of tanker flow return within 1-2 weeks, another 1-2 months before it returns to 100%
- Brent at \$90/bbl, with temporary supply loss from shipping frictions
- 30-40bp push to headline inflation in most economies over 3+ months, but central banks may look past it

Risk assets also outperform in this scenario. Global equities will focus on solid macro and look through the temporary supply loss, and view higher headline inflation as 'transitory'. That term may stir up some difficult memories for those who remember how long 'transitory' turned out to be in terms of elevated inflation post-pandemic. But given how in this scenario there's *one* observed source of supply shock, markets will be liable to believe central banks wouldn't turn hawkish. The preference for equities over fixed income stands; while this backdrop may mean markets don't price in hikes, the *timing* of cuts – if they come at all? – becomes more uncertain, and rates vol stays elevated relative to equity vol. Credit will still face AI-related issuance pressures, but rates staying higher for longer means *absolute* yields on corporate bonds remain compelling, attracting strong inflows; allocation to cash is high for similar reasons. In fact, this scenario is not dissimilar to 2022-2023 – probably not what rates investors or anyone involved in portfolio construction would like to hear...

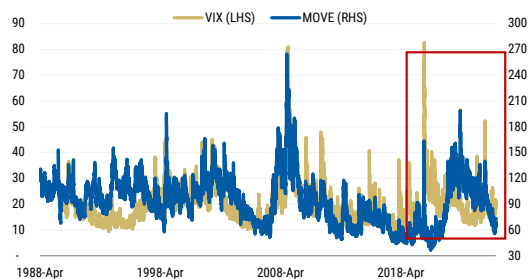
Allocation in this scenario: OW equities, UW government bonds, EW corporate credit, OW cash.

Exhibit 4: 10% rise in oil prices leads 35bp push to US inflation over three months



Source: BLS, Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research

Exhibit 5: Divergence in equity and rates vol was particularly pronounced coming out of the pandemic



Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research

Effective closure

- Sustained impairment of Hormuz transit; tanker flows materially curtailed, insurance withdrawn
- Effective closure remains for 4-5 weeks or longer, demand destruction necessary to rebalance the market
- Brent at \$120-130/bbl, forcing material demand destruction if logistics constraints translate into a severe supply loss
- Larger inflation push and potential GDP growth impacts create dual risks for central banks

Bonds outperform, despite the initial inflation push, but it all comes down to sequencing. Yes, oil being sustainably higher creates inflationary pressure. But at some point, this also causes a deterioration in economic activity, and markets will price for central banks becoming more willing to prioritize weakness in labour markets and consumer spending over price levels. In other words, the extreme oil supply shock leads to a more traditional demand shock slowdown, which in turn calls for the typical recession playbook.

Allocation in this scenario: UW equities, OW government bonds, EW corporate credit, OW cash.

These scenarios provide a useful framing. However, there's a wide range of outcomes and uncertainty is high, a reason why our European Energy team has started publishing a [daily tracker](#) on activity around the Strait of Hormuz.

It's not just about returns, it's about correlations too

Equities and bonds selling off together at various points this week sparked by the conflict in Iran have brought up the spectre of markets coming out of the pandemic, when stocks-UST returns correlation stayed stubbornly positive. Back then, 60/40 equity-bond portfolios saw the worst annual performance in nearly a century, and the memories of that experience run so deep that even now, several years on, we often have long debates with investors on whether bonds work as diversifiers. Those discussions almost always begin with the question, "Are correlations broken?" That question has now reared its ugly head again.

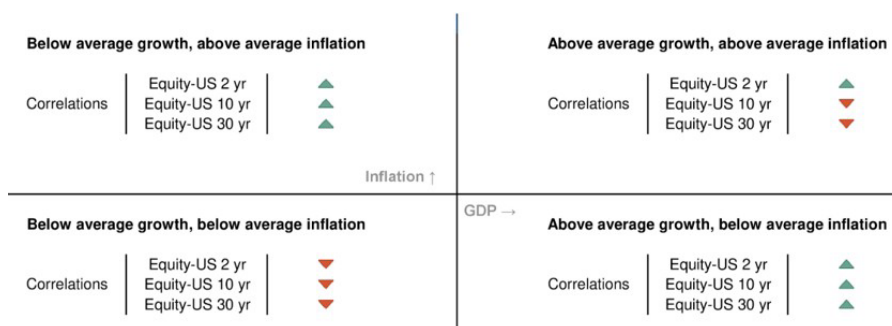
Our answer is that even in an environment like this, equity-bond correlations can remain intact and bonds can diversify risk, but with important caveats:

- it depends on how oil supply disruptions on the back of the conflict in Middle East could impact growth and inflation longer term, and
- some bonds work better than others in cushioning portfolios when equities sell off – not all safe havens are built the same.

Wait, what's oil got to do with correlations?

As we've [pointed out over the past few years](#), the 'classic' negative correlation between stock and bond returns is underpinned by the 'traditional' relationship of growth and inflation travelling in the same direction: stocks offset losses in bonds as growth rises alongside inflation, and vice versa. However, when growth and inflation go in different directions, as they did coming out of the pandemic, you get the opposite. Back in 2021-2023, bond markets that were worried about inflation could not offset losses in equities, which were concerned about growth. Everyone loses in that scenario.

Exhibit 6: Cross-asset correlations during different economic scenarios: a sustained oil shock can get us to the upper left quadrant. Again.



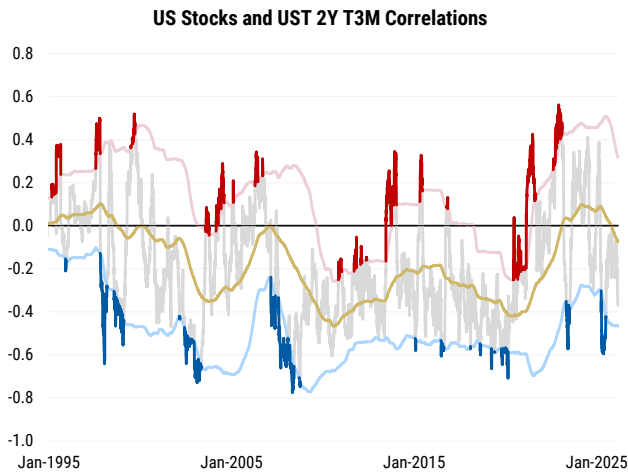
Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Green upwards arrow represents positive monthly returns correlations, and red downwards arrow represents negative monthly returns correlations. Correlations are calculated on the weekly changes on returns on a trailing monthly basis with data since 1980.

Our various **economists around the globe have already been highlighting how an oil price shock from the conflict in Iran can feed through to stagflationary pressures** – see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for some examples. These are just risk scenarios for now, but we think asset allocations should factor in the possibility that stock-bond correlations can 'break' once again and go back to the 'bad' regime should markets continue to price for growth risks and higher inflation.

Choose your diversifier

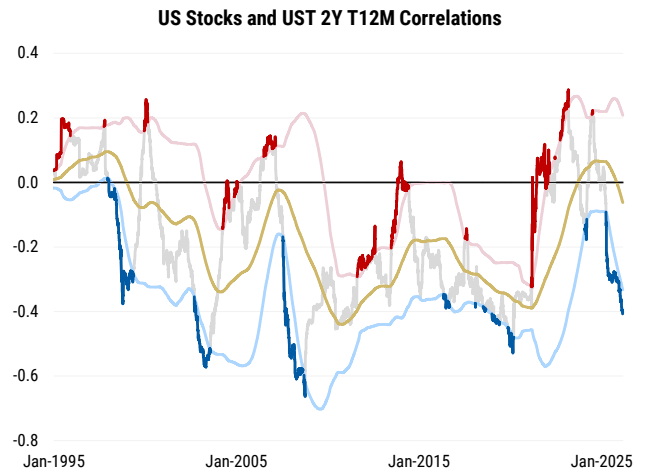
Perhaps because there's so much else going on, some may not have noticed that US stocks and front-end UST return correlations have been quietly normalizing through 2025. Or maybe it's because the effects of correlations moving back towards trend are a lot less spectacular than when it derails and portfolios suffer for it. As [Exhibit 7](#) shows, **stock - UST 2Y trailing 3M returns correlations have been negative and trending since 2024.** The picture is even clearer when looking at correlations on a trailing 12M basis as we show in [Exhibit 8](#); not only are stock-bond return correlations negative, they are *extremely* negative compared to last 3Y history.

Exhibit 7: US stocks - UST 2Y trailing 3M returns correlations



Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Correlations calculated on daily changes on total returns. Light red and light blue show +/-1.5SD.

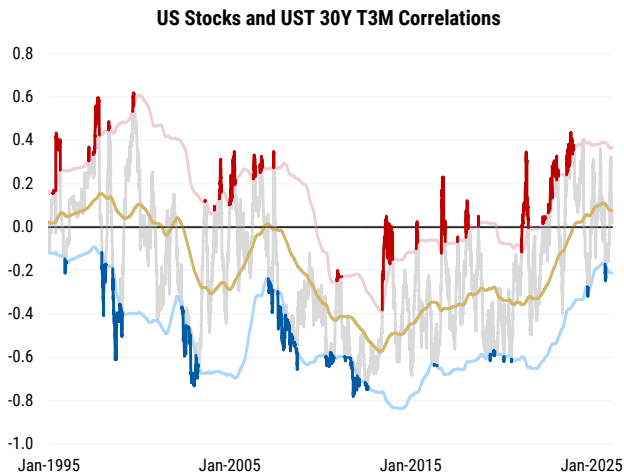
Exhibit 8: US stocks - UST 2Y trailing 12M returns correlations



Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Correlations calculated on daily changes on total returns. Light red and light blue show +/-1.5SD.

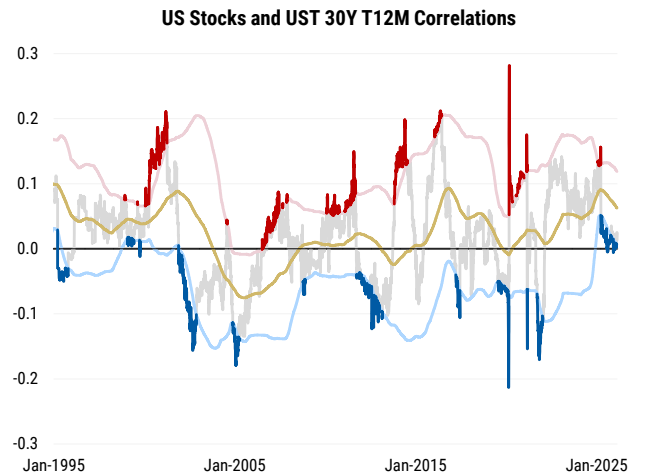
This isn't true for all bonds, though. **US stocks-UST 30Y return correlations have remained stickier**, even though they are starting to trend downwards. What likely explains this is how much markets now assign higher term premium to the back end of the UST curve, shifting from seeing it as a safe haven to more of a risk asset. This also means the gap between UST 2Y and UST 30Y correlation with US stocks has stayed wide for a while ([Exhibit 11](#)).

Exhibit 9: US stocks - UST 30Y trailing 3M returns correlation



Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Correlations calculated on daily changes on total returns. Light red and light blue show +/-1.5SD.

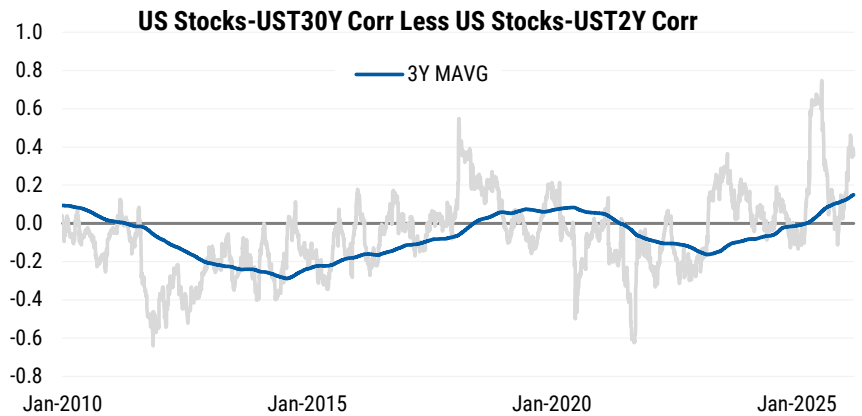
Exhibit 10: US stocks - UST 2Y trailing 12M returns correlation



Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Correlations calculated on daily changes on total returns. Light red and light blue show +/-1.5SD.

Exhibit 11:

The gap between UST 2Y and UST 30Y correlation with US stocks has stayed wide versus history for several years now



Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Correlations calculated on daily changes on total returns.

The challenge right now is that higher oil prices on the back of concerns around the Strait of Hormuz is pushing up the *front end* more, leading to a bear-flattening – a reflection that inflation fears are in the front seat while concerns around US policy uncertainty take a back seat. Whether shorter-dated bonds or longer-dated bonds function better as a diversifier from this point would depend on which of these worries will win out over the medium term.

Appendix: Market Performance Around Geopolitical Events

Exhibit 12: S&P 500 returns around selected geopolitical events

Episode	Start Date	1D	1W	1M	3M	12M
Korean War	1950-Jun-25	0.0%	-2.3%	-4.9%	7.3%	19.0%
Vietnam War starts	1955-Nov-01	0.2%	4.4%	7.3%	3.6%	9.7%
Suez Crisis	1956-Oct-29	-0.1%	2.6%	-4.2%	-4.1%	-12.9%
1958 Lebanon Crisis	1958-Jul-15	0.3%	2.9%	6.2%	13.6%	32.0%
Indo-Pakistani War	1965-Aug-05	0.3%	0.7%	2.6%	7.8%	-2.2%
Six-Day War	1967-Jun-05	2.0%	4.1%	3.3%	5.9%	13.1%
Fall/Liberation of Saigon	1975-Apr-30	0.9%	2.0%	4.4%	1.8%	17.0%
Iran Hostage Crisis	1979-Nov-04	0.0%	-0.3%	4.9%	13.1%	25.2%
Soviet Afghan War	1979-Dec-24	0.0%	0.3%	5.4%	-7.8%	26.1%
Iran-Iraq War	1980-Sep-22	-0.7%	-5.3%	1.2%	4.1%	-10.1%
Multinational Force in Lebanon	1982-Aug-25	0.8%	0.6%	4.9%	13.9%	37.1%
1986 United States bombing of Libya	1986-Apr-15	1.9%	2.0%	-1.4%	-1.7%	17.4%
United States invasion of Panama	1989-Dec-20	0.6%	1.7%	-1.1%	-0.9%	-3.7%
Gulf War	1990-Aug-02	-1.9%	-3.3%	-8.2%	-12.6%	10.1%
Iraqi no-fly zones conflict	1991-Mar-01	-0.3%	1.2%	2.4%	5.2%	11.4%
Croatian War	1991-Mar-31	0.0%	1.1%	1.1%	0.0%	8.7%
Bosnian War	1992-Apr-06	-1.9%	0.1%	2.8%	2.0%	9.0%
Kosovo War	1998-Feb-28	0.0%	0.8%	5.2%	4.1%	18.2%
War in Afghanistan	2001-Oct-07	0.0%	2.7%	5.3%	10.4%	-24.6%
Iraq War	2003-Mar-20	2.3%	-0.8%	1.9%	13.6%	28.2%
Russia-Ukraine war	2022-Feb-24	2.2%	1.7%	6.7%	-5.4%	-6.4%
Average		0.3%	0.8%	2.2%	3.5%	10.6%
Median		0.0%	1.1%	2.8%	4.1%	11.4%

Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Start dates for conflicts are used, except for the Vietnam War, for which the start date and the US evacuation from Saigon are both included, due to the length of the conflict.

Exhibit 13: DXY returns around selected geopolitical events

Episode	Start Date	1D	1W	1M	3M	12M
Fall/Liberation of Saigon	1975-Apr-30	0.0%	-0.5%	-0.8%	6.0%	11.5%
Iran Hostage Crisis	1979-Nov-04	0.0%	0.4%	-2.3%	-2.8%	-0.3%
Soviet Afghan War	1979-Dec-24	0.0%	-0.4%	-0.7%	6.3%	5.1%
Iran-Iraq War	1980-Sep-22	0.3%	0.1%	1.2%	5.3%	20.7%
Multinational Force in Lebanon	1982-Aug-25	0.4%	2.3%	3.6%	4.9%	9.5%
1986 United States bombing of Libya	1986-Apr-15	-2.1%	-4.3%	-4.8%	-6.0%	-18.1%
United States invasion of Panama	1989-Dec-20	-0.2%	-1.8%	-0.7%	0.1%	-12.5%
Gulf War	1990-Aug-02	-0.2%	0.0%	-1.3%	-5.6%	7.1%
Iraqi no-fly zones conflict	1991-Mar-01	-0.1%	1.7%	6.5%	9.8%	4.9%
Croatian War	1991-Mar-31	0.0%	0.1%	1.1%	6.1%	-1.1%
Bosnian War	1992-Apr-06	-0.2%	0.9%	-0.4%	-6.6%	2.4%
Kosovo War	1998-Feb-28	0.0%	1.1%	1.9%	0.9%	-0.9%
War in Afghanistan	2001-Oct-07	0.0%	0.9%	2.3%	3.3%	-4.4%
Iraq War	2003-Mar-20	0.8%	-0.5%	-1.5%	-7.9%	-13.4%
Russia-Ukraine war	2022-Feb-24	-0.5%	0.7%	2.0%	4.8%	7.7%
Average		-0.1%	0.0%	0.4%	1.3%	1.2%
Median		0.0%	0.1%	-0.4%	3.3%	2.4%

Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Start dates for conflicts are used, except for the Vietnam War, for which the start date and the US evacuation from Saigon are both included, due to the length of the conflict.

Exhibit 14: Brent oil around selected geopolitical events

Episode	Start Date	1D	1W	1M	3M	12M
1986 United States bombing of Libya	1986-Apr-15	-7.7%	-0.6%	22.1%	-7.2%	44.9%
United States invasion of Panama	1989-Dec-20	1.7%	3.4%	6.7%	-1.3%	34.8%
Gulf War	1990-Aug-02	6.0%	11.6%	20.7%	63.6%	22.8%
Iraqi no-fly zones conflict	1991-Mar-01	4.0%	-0.5%	3.1%	13.6%	1.7%
Croatian War	1991-Mar-31	0.0%	3.5%	10.4%	7.8%	2.4%
Bosnian War	1992-Apr-06	-1.1%	-0.9%	1.9%	7.3%	2.0%
Kosovo War	1998-Feb-28	0.0%	-2.4%	-0.4%	-7.1%	-42.3%
War in Afghanistan	2001-Oct-07	0.0%	-0.2%	-12.5%	-8.0%	23.7%
Iraq War	2003-Mar-20	-4.3%	8.0%	6.4%	13.0%	63.9%
Russia-Ukraine war	2022-Feb-24	-1.2%	15.0%	16.5%	27.0%	-8.6%
Average		-0.2%	3.7%	7.5%	10.9%	14.5%
Median		0.0%	1.6%	6.6%	7.5%	12.6%

Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Start dates for conflicts are used, except for the Vietnam War, for which the start date and the US evacuation from Saigon are both included, due to the length of the conflict.

Exhibit 15: Gold around selected geopolitical events

Episode	Start Date	1D	1W	1M	3M	12M
Fall/Liberation of Saigon	1975-Apr-30	-0.6%	-1.0%	0.0%	0.1%	-23.4%
Iran Hostage Crisis	1979-Nov-04	0.0%	2.2%	13.2%	77.6%	65.1%
Soviet Afghan War	1979-Dec-24	0.0%	8.2%	46.9%	18.0%	25.7%
Iran-Iraq War	1980-Sep-22	0.1%	-4.3%	-7.0%	-16.2%	-34.7%
Multinational Force in Lebanon	1982-Aug-25	4.0%	1.1%	7.5%	2.1%	5.7%
1986 United States bombing of Libya	1986-Apr-15	-0.8%	0.7%	0.1%	1.2%	29.5%
United States invasion of Panama	1989-Dec-20	0.1%	-1.6%	-0.9%	-4.9%	-8.1%
Gulf War	1990-Aug-02	-0.4%	0.8%	1.6%	-0.1%	-4.5%
Iraqi no-fly zones conflict	1991-Mar-01	-0.4%	0.4%	-2.6%	-1.8%	-3.6%
Croatian War	1991-Mar-31	0.0%	0.8%	0.6%	3.6%	-4.3%
Bosnian War	1992-Apr-06	-0.1%	0.5%	-0.8%	2.2%	0.4%
Kosovo War	1998-Feb-28	0.0%	-1.7%	0.5%	-2.2%	-4.2%
War in Afghanistan	2001-Oct-07	0.0%	-2.6%	-4.0%	-4.4%	10.4%
Iraq War	2003-Mar-20	-1.9%	-0.9%	0.4%	8.8%	23.8%
Russia-Ukraine war	2022-Feb-24	-0.8%	1.7%	1.0%	-2.8%	-4.3%
Average		0.0%	0.3%	3.8%	5.4%	4.9%
Median		0.0%	0.5%	0.4%	0.1%	-3.6%

Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Start dates for conflicts are used, except for the Vietnam War, for which the start date and the US evacuation from Saigon are both included, due to the length of the conflict.

Exhibit 16: UST 2y yield changes around selected geopolitical events

Episode	Start Date	1D	1W	1M	3M	12M
Iran Hostage Crisis	1979-Nov-04	0	-37	-85	-11	93
Soviet Afghan War	1979-Dec-24	0	-21	9	392	180
Iran-Iraq War	1980-Sep-22	0	38	31	124	379
Multinational Force in Lebanon	1982-Aug-25	1	34	-1	-186	-97
1986 United States bombing of Libya	1986-Apr-15	-14	15	75	5	65
United States invasion of Panama	1989-Dec-20	1	24	52	106	-44
Gulf War	1990-Aug-02	-6	10	23	-22	-106
Iraqi no-fly zones conflict	1991-Mar-01	-1	-9	-22	-48	-193
Croatian War	1991-Mar-31	0	-10	-23	-10	-135
Bosnian War	1992-Apr-06	-9	-27	-15	-92	-143
Kosovo War	1998-Feb-28	0	0	-1	-5	-43
War in Afghanistan	2001-Oct-07	0	11	-37	46	-91
Iraq War	2003-Mar-20	14	-3	3	-49	-12
Russia-Ukraine war	2022-Feb-24	-1	-5	75	90	312
Average		-1	1	6	24	12
Median		0	-2	1	-7	-44

Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Start dates for conflicts are used, except for the Vietnam War, for which the start date and the US evacuation from Saigon are both included, due to the length of the conflict.

Exhibit 17: UST 10y yield changes around selected geopolitical events

Episode	Start Date	1D	1W	1M	3M	12M
Indo-Pakistani War	5-Aug-65	1	2	4	20	84
Six-Day War	5-Jun-67	-1	9	32	40	94
Fall/Liberation of Saigon	30-Apr-75	0	-24	-27	-15	-71
Iran Hostage Crisis	1979-Nov-04	0	-17	-53	44	161
Soviet Afghan War	1979-Dec-24	0	-12	37	272	169
Iran-Iraq War	1980-Sep-22	7	38	19	45	309
Multinational Force in Lebanon	1982-Aug-25	12	33	-34	-184	-92
1986 United States bombing of Libya	1986-Apr-15	-23	5	70	-5	100
United States invasion of Panama	1989-Dec-20	0	17	47	80	23
Gulf War	1990-Aug-02	7	27	49	17	-22
Iraqi no-fly zones conflict	1991-Mar-01	1	1	-10	-6	-87
Croatian War	1991-Mar-31	0	-8	-5	16	-55
Bosnian War	1992-Apr-06	-4	-9	6	-52	-130
Kosovo War	1998-Feb-28	0	2	-4	-15	-41
War in Afghanistan	2001-Oct-07	0	16	-25	62	-84
Iraq War	2003-Mar-20	15	-3	3	-62	-20
Russia-Ukraine war	2022-Feb-24	0	-12	50	78	191
Average		1	4	9	20	31
Median		0	2	4	17	-20

Source: Bloomberg, Morgan Stanley Research; Note: Start dates for conflicts are used, except for the Vietnam War, for which the start date and the US evacuation from Saigon are both included, due to the length of the conflict.

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(as of February 28, 2026)

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Stock Rating Category	Coverage Universe		Investment Banking Clients (IBC)			Other Material Investment Services Clients (MISC)	
	Count	% of Total	Count	% of Total IBC	% of Rating Category	Count	% of Total Other MISC
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Not-Rated/Hold	4	0%	1	0%	25%	1	0%
Underweight/Sell	588	16%	87	10%	15%	220	13%
Total	3,710		906			1636	

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