

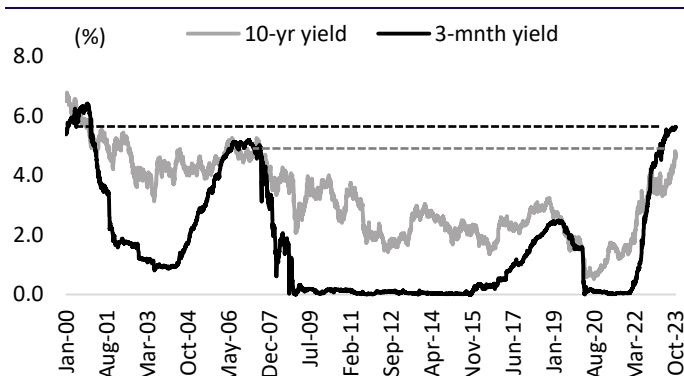
US bond yields may remain elevated

- During the past three months, the benchmark 10-year US treasury yield has surged toward 4.75%, about 100bp higher than the mid-Jul'23 level. Notably, the rise in the yield is not limited only to the longer end, but it is seen across the curve and more at the shorter end, as the spread between the 3-month yield and the 10-year yield has actually narrowed from -1.5pp in mid-Jul'23 (and 4-decade low of -1.89pp in early Jun'23) to -0.9pp in Oct'23, last seen in early 2023. (All data used here is as of 16th Oct'23).
- If the cost of funds increases sharply and continuously, it is usually believed to hurt borrowers. Nevertheless, since a bulk (~90%) of household loans are fixed-term, higher rates have not pinched customers in the US. Because of this, the burden of higher interest rates will be borne by the lenders, due to the higher cost of roll-over and/or refinancing the loans. On top of this, the financial institutions also see a drop in the value of their securities portfolios due to higher interest rates.
- Moreover, although higher rates may not affect existing customers, they are likely to affect new demand badly, hurting home prices. This, if happens, will have the potential to broaden and sharpen the economic slowdown. However, mortgage/non-mortgage loans continue to grow decently, which shows that consumers are not worried so far.
- None of these troublesome implications, thus, have played out so far. Our expectation of a serious US slowdown by mid-2023 did not materialize, and even the soft landing theory has been elusive. The US economy remains strong, supported by the drawdown in savings by US consumers, which is in contrast to most other rich nations.
- However, this is unlikely to continue for a long period, especially if bond yields stay so elevated. Only ~8% of the market participants expect a rate hike on 1st Nov'23, down from 33% a month ago, and 29% expect it in Dec'23 (up from 2.3% a month ago). It means that the majority of participants would be surprised if the US Federal Reserve delivers another rate hike, like they projected in their Sep'23 policy meeting.
- We believe that even if the Fed does not hike rates in the next meeting, it cannot afford to loosen its stance. If so, bond yields will remain elevated, and the longer they stay high, the higher the risk of an economic slowdown is. Accordingly, we push our expectation of a US economic slowdown into 1HCY24.

US bond yields have risen across the curve

During the past three months, the benchmark 10-year US treasury yield has surged toward 4.75%, about 100bp higher than the mid-Jul'23 level. This is the highest level in almost 16 years (*Exhibit 1*). Notably, the rise in the yield is not limited to the longer-end. The rise is more at the shorter end, with the 3-month yield on treasury bills at almost 23-year high of 5.6%. The spread between 3-month and 10-year yield, thus, has narrowed from -1.5pp in mid-Jul'23 (and 4-decade low of -1.89pp in early Jun'23) to -0.9pp in Oct'23, last seen in early-2023 (*Exhibit 2*).

Exhibit 1: US bond yields have risen to multi-year high in recent months...



All data as of 16th October 2023

Exhibit 2: ...but the spread between 3-month and 10-yr yield has narrowed



Source: US Department of Treasury, CEIC, MOFSL

Nikhil Gupta – Research analyst (Nikhil.Gupta@MotilalOswal.com)

Tanisha Ladha – Research analyst (Tanisha.Ladha@MotilalOswal.com)

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Unrealized losses of the financial institutions have surged

If the cost of funds increases sharply and continuously, it is usually believed to hurt borrowers. Nevertheless, since a bulk (~90%) of household loans are fixed-term, higher rates have not pinched customers. Because of this, the burden of higher interest rates will be borne by lenders, due to the higher cost of roll-over and/or refinancing the loans. On top of this, financial institutions also see a drop in the value of their securities portfolios due to higher interest rates.

According to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), the unrealized losses on investment securities of all the FDIC-insured institutions in the US have amounted to close to or more than USD500b during the past five quarters. Since the Fed started hiking interest rates in Mar'22, unrealized gains have disappeared (from USD29.4b in 3QCY21) and large losses (totaling USD558b in 2QCY23) have emerged (*Exhibit 3*). The unrealized losses are divided in the ratio of 45:55 between available-for-sale (AFS) and held-to-maturity (HTM) securities portfolios.

Exhibit 3: Unrealized losses have surged massively since mid-CY22...

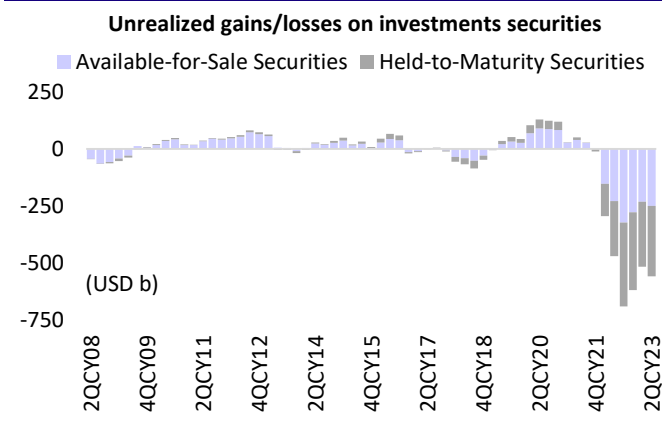
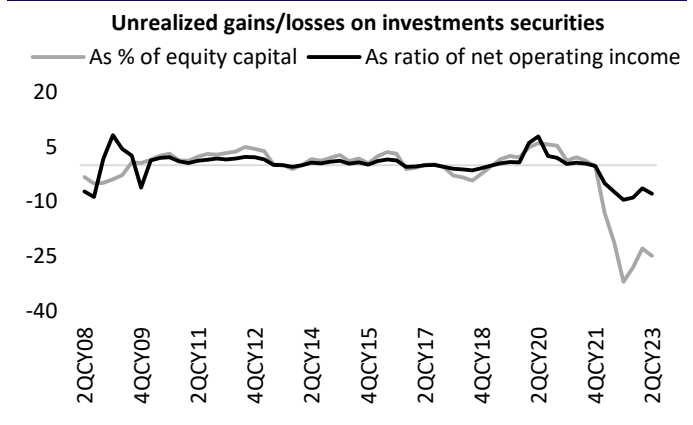


Exhibit 4: ...amounting to ~25% of total equity capital of these institutions

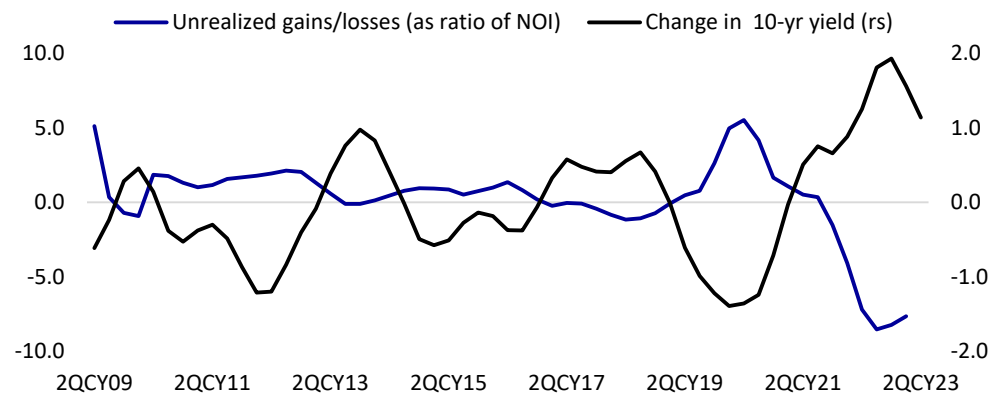


Source: FDIC, CEIC, MOFSL

For the size of the US economy, half a trillion dollars may not sound like a big loss, but note that this amounts to almost a quarter of the entire equity capital of all these institutions and more than 7x of their net operating income (*Exhibit 4*).

We are not suggesting that all these losses will be realized. However, it is probable that some institutions may be forced to unwind their positions unwillingly, making it economically very difficult for them to survive. Overall, it may not bring down the entire financial sector, but it definitely holds the potential to send chills. Of course, timely intervention by an extremely active US Fed could change the course.

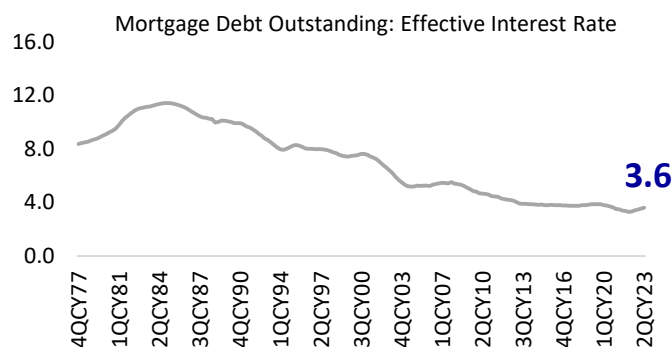
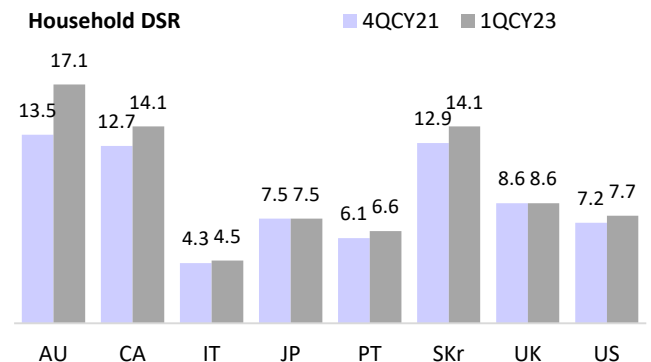
The FDIC has maintained this data since 1QCY08, i.e., for the last 15 years. Plotting it against the 10-year US treasury bond yield confirms a decent inverse correlation between the two, i.e., higher yields lead to lower gains/larger losses and vice-versa. It is, thus, very likely that these unrealized losses would have likely increased further in 3QCY23, since the benchmark US bond yield crossed 4% for the first time on quarterly basis since FDIC data is available (*Exhibit 5*).

Exhibit 5: Unrealized gains/losses are connected with US 10-yr yield

All data is 3-quarter moving average. Change in 10-yr yield represents YoY change in yield per quarter.
Source: RBI, CSO, Various national sources, CEIC, MOFSL

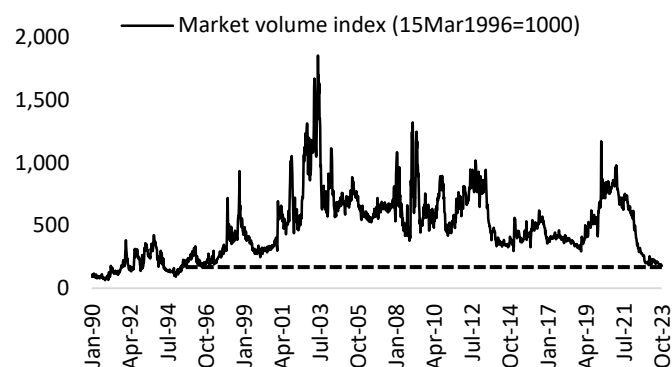
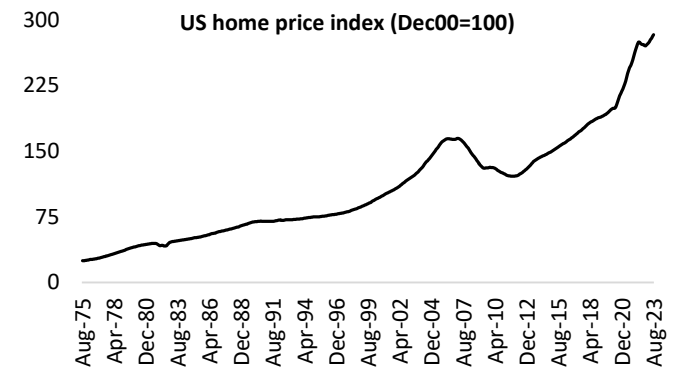
Mortgage market shows some signs of weakness, but home prices stable

It is widely, and correctly, argued that higher interest rates are unlikely to hurt existing borrowers since most of them are on fixed-rate mortgages. In contrast to many European nations, more than 90% of mortgage loans are on a fixed rate, saving the borrowers from steep rate hikes witnessed in the past 18 months. Not surprisingly then, the effective interest rate (interest payments divided by outstanding loans) on outstanding US mortgage debt has risen only marginally from its 46-year low of 3.3% in 1QCY22 to 3.6% in 2QCY23 (*Exhibit 6*). Further, a comparison of the household debt service ratio (DSR) of the US vs. other major advanced nations confirms that it has not risen tremendously in the US (*Exhibit 7*).

Exhibit 6: Effective interest rate on mortgage debt in the US has risen marginally recently...**Exhibit 7: ...and household DSR has also increased slightly compared to many other rich nations**

Source: US Federal Reserve, BIS, CEIC, MOFSL

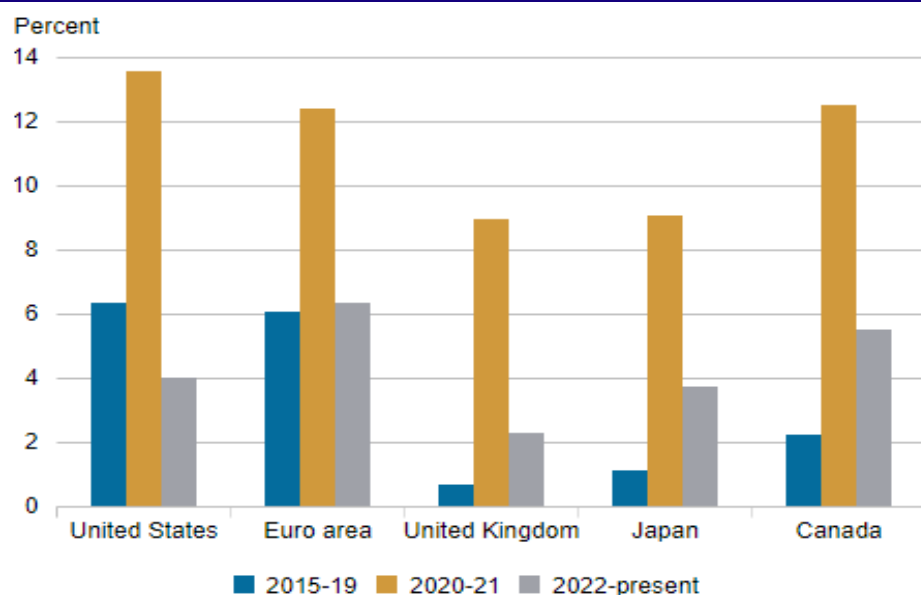
Moreover, although higher rates may not affect existing customers, they are likely to affect new demand badly, hurting home prices. A look at the mortgage applications confirms that the market composite index, a measure of mortgage loan application volume, has fallen to the lowest level in more than 28 years, i.e. since mid-1995 (*Exhibit 8*). Home prices, however, have improved in the last couple of months, after witnessing some pressures in 1HCY23 (*Exhibit 9*). Moreover, mortgage/non-mortgage loans also continue to grow decently, which shows that consumers are not worried so far.

Exhibit 8: Mortgage loan applications volume has declined sharply...**Exhibit 9: ...but home prices have stabilized in recent months, after falling in 1HCY23**

Source: Mortgage Bankers' association, Freddie Mac, CEIC, MOFSL

No hard or soft landing thanks to spendthrift US consumers

In sum, none of these troublesome implications have played out so far. Our expectation of a serious US slowdown by [mid-2023](#) did not materialize, and even the soft landing theory has been elusive. As far as the economic activity is concerned, it has surprised positively month after month. One of the key reasons for such strong US economic growth amid the weakening global economy is the different behavior of US households. In stark contrast to their counterparts in other major nations, US households have eaten into their savings, supporting consumption, and thus real GDP growth. In a recent analysis posted by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (FRBNY) in their popular blog called [Liberty Street Economics](#), the authors conclude that spending pandemic-led savings is an “only-in-the-US” phenomenon (*Exhibit 10*). Their analysis found that “...The average U.S. saving rate since 2022 is down some 2.5 percentage points from the 2015-19 average. Saving rates elsewhere range from slightly above pre-pandemic norms (0.5 percentage point higher in the euro area) to markedly above (3.5 percentage points higher in Canada)...”.

Exhibit 10: Household savings rate above pre-pandemic levels outside the US

Data are through the second quarter of 2023 for the U.S., euro area, UK, and Canada, and through the first quarter of 2023 for Japan

Source: “Spending Down Pandemic Savings Is an “Only-in-the-U.S.” Phenomenon,” Federal Reserve Bank of New York Liberty Street Economics, October 11, 2023

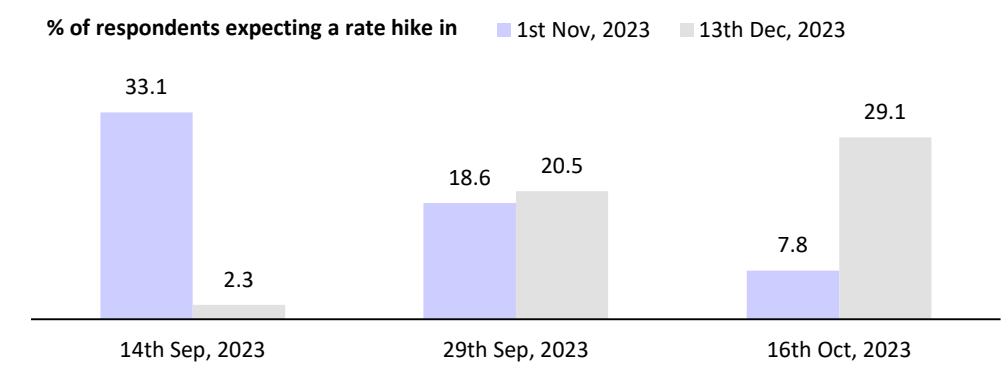
Assuming ceteris paribus, this drawdown (or excess) savings by US households in the pandemic helped keep consumption and real GDP growth higher. “...If the U.S. saving rates had remained at the pre-pandemic average value (implying zero excess saving), the two indexes would have tracked in tandem. Real consumption would then be some 3 percent lower than at present for the given level of income. By itself, this would leave real GDP about 2 percent lower...”.

US bond yields could remain elevated for long

All-in-all, a significant feel-good virtuous loop seems to be in effect at this stage in the US. The households are drawing down their savings (for reasons that are not very clear), boosting their consumption and real GDP growth, which in turn is helping the producers to continue making strong profits, increasing production and keeping employment high. Accordingly, the unemployment rate remained at 3.8% in Sep’23, close to a record low of 3.5% a few months ago.

However, this is unlikely to continue for a long period of time, especially if the bond yields stay so elevated. Only ~8% of the market participants expect a rate hike on 1st Nov’23, down from 33% participants a month ago, and 29% are expecting it in Dec’23 (up from 2.3% a month ago). It means that the majority of participants would be surprised if the US Fed delivers another rate hike, like they projected in their Sep’23 policy meeting (*Exhibit 11*).

Exhibit 11: Rate hike expectations have moderated in the past one month



Source: Bloomberg, MOFSL

We believe that even if the US Fed does not hike rates in the next policy meeting, it cannot afford to loosen its stance. If so, bond yields will remain elevated, and the longer they stay high, the higher the risk of an economic slowdown is. Accordingly, we push our expectation of a US economic slowdown into 1HCY24.

In short, neither the financial sector has realized the accumulating large losses on their books nor has new activity weakened dramatically so far. It will not be surprising if both of them happen simultaneously, making the job of policymakers extremely difficult.

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