

US Watch

November FOMC quick reaction: Dovish but still biased to hike

Key takeaways

- The Fed maintained the target range for the Fed funds rate at 5.25-5.50%, and the statement leaned dovish.
- The press conference was similarly cautious, although Chair Powell left the door wide open for additional tightening.
- We retain our call for one more 25bp hike in December, although it has become an even closer call after today's meeting.

The decision: A dovish signal

As expected, the description of current economic conditions in the FOMC statement was upgraded to reflect the strength in 3Q GDP and the September jobs report. We think the FOMC is underscoring that its base case is that growth will slow going forward. Another change in the statement was in the second paragraph, in which financial tightening was cited in addition to credit tightening as a potential headwind to economic activity. The choice to add this concern to the statement is dovish on the margin.

Chair Powell did not break much new ground in his press conference, although again we thought it leaned dovish. Powell made four strong assertions that we thought were noteworthy. In terms of forward guidance, Powell downplayed the September Summary of Economic Projections but left the door wide open for another hike, either in December or later.

We retain our call for one more 25bp hike in December, although it has become an even closer call after today's meeting. Market pricing for another hike cumulatively through January dropped from nearly 50% as of this morning to around 35% as of this writing.

Market reaction

The Nov FOMC meeting did not change our outlook on rates: we recommend investors remain neutral duration, expect curve steepening (across nominal, real, & vol curves), and tighter swap spreads. The spread tightening bias has shifted towards shorter tenors on the UST curve driven by Treasury's Nov refunding decision to issue more bills vs coupons. We continue to believe investors should nibble on duration with 10Y rates near 5% but refrain from a more constructive duration stance until economic data moderates or risk assets reflect clearer negative feedback from high rates.

The statement was again very little changed, outside the nod to tighter financial conditions, and thus elicited little reaction in the USD. Overall Chair Powell's comments in the press conference did not deliver a more assertive hawkishness, which weighed marginally on the dollar throughout the press conference, with the DXY appx 0.25% lower on net post-statement, though little changed on the day.

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FOMC: Federal Open Market
Committee

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US Economics

A dovish statement

As expected, the description of current economic conditions in the FOMC statement was upgraded to reflect the strength in 3Q GDP and the September jobs report. The phrase “economic activity has been expanding at a solid pace” was replaced by “economic activity expanded at a strong pace in the third quarter”. By referring to strong growth in the past tense, we think the FOMC is underscoring that its base case is that growth will slow going forward. This was our takeaway from Governor Waller and Chair Powell’s comments a couple of weeks ago, as well. In terms of job growth, the statement notes that it has “moderated since earlier in the year”. We struggle with this assertion because September’s nonfarm payroll gains were the strongest since January.

The only other change in the statement was in the second paragraph, in which financial tightening was cited in addition to credit tightening as a potential headwind to economic activity. Several Fed speakers have raised concerns about financial tightening in recent months, but the choice to add this concern to the statement is dovish on the margin. There were no changes to the forward guidance language, which still emphasizes data dependence.

A cautious press conference

Chair Powell did not break much new ground in his press conference, although again we thought it leaned dovish. Powell made four strong assertions that we thought were noteworthy (and he repeated some of these a few times over). First, inflation expectations are anchored. He appears to be willing to look through the spike in one-year expectations in the October University of Michigan survey, as it was likely driven by gas prices. Instead, the Fed takes solace in stable long-term inflation expectations (unchanged at 3%). This makes sense to us.

Second, Powell asserted that a broad range of measures of r^* suggest policy is restrictive, and we are seeing that in the rate-sensitive sectors of the economy. We are not so sure about this, since housing and some components of business investment have surprised to the upside this year, and durables spending has surged. Of course this could be a matter of “long and variable lags” in policy transmission, which would mean that there is more pain to come in these sectors. When asked about the strength in economic activity, Powell argued that potential growth could be higher in the near term because of supply factors, and excess savings might be understated. We agree on the latter. But the broad takeaway here is that Powell does not see the pickup in growth this year as necessarily indicative of insufficiently restrictive policy.

Third, Powell repeated his argument that risks have become more balanced after aggressive Fed tightening. No surprise here, but it is a reminder that the Fed would likely be willing to wait longer to get inflation back to 2 percent if that means avoiding a hard landing, as long as it feels inflation is on the right path.

Finally, on the labor market Powell noted positive developments in labor supply and stated that wages have not been responsible for price inflation in this cycle, although that could change over time. These suggests that the Fed might be willing to look through labor market tightness to a greater degree than we previously thought.

Beyond this, Powell was asked a couple of times to quantify the impact of financial tightening in terms of rate hikes. He did not provide a precise answer but he noted that it would depend on how persistent the tightening was and the degree to which it was not “endogenous”, i.e. not simply a function of Fed expectations.

In terms of forward guidance, Powell downplayed the September Summary of Economic Projections but left the door wide open for another hike, either in December or later. He said the Fed still has a bias to hike in the sense that it is only considering the question of whether to hike or hold at this stage. Policymakers have not yet gotten to the question of how long the Fed should stay at the neutral rate. The question is whether

markets will continue to give the Fed the optionality to hike given that the statement and the rest of the press conference was otherwise rather dovish.

Final hike in December

We retain our call for one more 25bp hike in December, although it has become an even closer call after today's meeting. Market pricing for another hike cumulatively through January dropped from nearly 50% as of this morning to around 35% as of this writing.

US Rates

The rates market interpreted FOMC communications as dovish. The UST curve bull steepened in response to Fed communications, which emphasized a desire to proceed carefully given recent tightening of financial & credit conditions. Chair Powell reiterated with relatively strong conviction that policy is currently at a restrictive level and reflected a diminished hiking bias from the Fed.

The Nov FOMC meeting did not change our outlook on rates: we recommend investors remain neutral duration, expect curve steepening (across nominal, real, and vol curves), and tighter swap spreads. The spread tightening bias has shifted towards shorter tenors on the UST curve driven by Treasury's Nov refunding decision to issue more bills vs coupons. We continue to believe investors should nibble on duration with 10Y rates near 5% but refrain from a more constructive duration stance until economic data moderates or risk assets reflect clearer negative feedback from high rates.

There were no changes to the setting of Fed administered rates or quantitative tightening (QT). Chair Powell suggested that reserves are currently abundant, which implies a desire to continue QT well beyond the exhaustion of Fed overnight reverse repurchase agreement (ON RRP) balances. We believe commercial bank behavior implies they are currently liquidity strained; banks are paying up and issuing large time deposits to increase their cash holdings. If banks continue with this behavior we believe reserve scarcity may be achieved faster than the Fed expects. We believe QT will not be able to run much beyond the depletion of the Fed ON RRP facility, which we expect to happen in 2H '24 or early '25.

FX

Going into today's FOMC, the market was in search of fresh policy guidance, with a "hawkish hold" seen as a likely outcome for today. The statement was again very little changed, outside the nod to tighter financial conditions, and thus elicited little reaction in the USD. Overall Chair Powell's comments in the press conference did not deliver a more assertive hawkishness, noting the Fed's already restrictive stance and downplaying of the additional hike penciled into the September Summary of Economic Projections (SEP). This weighed marginally on the dollar throughout the press conference, with the DXY appx 0.25% lower on net post-statement, though little changed on the day.

Chair Powell was non-committal on December, where market pricing was pared back by about 3 basis points from prior to the meeting. Powell underscored the 2 more inflation and employment reports as well as additional time to assess persistence of tighter financial conditions as key factors he would be looking at going into the next meeting. These events collectively are likely to be more meaningful for the USD over the remainder of the year.

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