Hedge Fund Investing During a Time of War

Like the 2020 edition, release of this year’s survey collides with a seismic event — a geopolitical shock wrapped around soaring inflation and rising interest rates. Economic and market turbulence is again generating a whole swath of new risks and opportunities.

“After the first five weeks of war notable for the heroic success of the Ukrainian defenders against the Russian invaders, I still cannot quite rid myself of the uneasy feeling that this is merely the opening act of a much larger tragedy.”

- Niall Ferguson

Two years ago, the pandemic was an immediate stress test for this survey’s Top 50 broad strategy managers who had delivered the leading 5-year annualized returns through 2019. Inclusion of first quarter 2020 returns revealed these select managers’ preserved capital far better than the market when stocks declined sharply. And for the rest of 2020, they kept pace with the subsequent rally, delivering returns in line with the S&P 500 but with much less risk.

This year’s findings are again challenged, this time by the horrific Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is propelling inflation even higher and ensuring interest rates will rise significantly. Nevertheless, the top-performing 50 funds, based on the past five years through 2021, have outperformed the market in the first quarter of 2022 by more than 7 percentage points.

While the war no longer dominates attention as it once did, its duration and outcome are very much unclear. JP Morgan CEO Jamie Dimon calls the Russian invasion “a huge global issue and like all wars its course is unpredictable.”

And it begs at least partial reference to a previous war that tore across the continent.

Invasion of Ukraine

“Ten thousand lay dead, and more than fifty thousand were injured. Buildings were reduced to charred skeletons; vast craters were left in the city streets. And night after night as the lights were extinguished across the city, some took to makeshift bomb shelters in underground stations . . . Once day broke, weary citizens would stumble out from their subterranean world and gaze anew at another round of devastation.”

This reporting could’ve been from any number of Ukrainian cities. But it wasn’t.

Historian Jay Winik was describing London nearly 80 years ago in his book 1944: FDR and the Year That Changed History. It’s a haunting reminder that only when allies join militarily will atrocities cease. And it’s also a reminder of the threat posed by authoritarianism.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine isn’t unique. We’ve seen horrific carnage in Cambodia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Bosnia, and Aleppo.

But this conflict is a de facto world war with a unified West pursuing the most comprehensive intervention without troops ever pursued against a major power.

The combination of massive sanctions levied against Russia and the remarkable decision by governments and industries to stop doing business with Putin is part of the second systemic shock to hit global markets in three years.

“The Russian invasion of Ukraine,” says Fiona Hill, the former senior director for European and Russian Affairs in President Trump’s National Security Council, “are all of these huge ruptures in political and security affairs with global implications.” And they will likely reverberate for years across economies and markets worldwide, exaggerating dispersion, creating a whole host of likely and unpredictable risks and opportunities.

Danish economist Lars Christensen sums up the larger picture. “We’re seeing the collision of events, each a major issue in its own right. The
pandemic, soaring inflation, central banks way behind the curve, China’s widespread Covid lockdowns, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have collectively given rise to geopolitical tensions and economic uncertainty we have not seen since Hitler was Chancellor of Germany.”

Due to the war and sanctions, the Financial Times reports Sweden’s Volvo Trucks expects to suffer losses of more than $400 million. US bank J.P. Morgan estimates it will likely take $1 billion hit. And Britain’s Shell Oil expects to suffer a $1 billion hit. And US bank J.P. Morgan estimates it will likely take a $1 billion hit. And Britain’s Shell Oil expects to suffer a $1 billion hit.

The war scuttled a major European bank merger: the potential tie-up of Italy’s UniCredit and Germany’s Commerzbank, valued at €785 billion, which may have jump-started the long-anticipated wave of new cross-border European bank consolidation needed to better rationalize the industry.

The International Money Fund believes, “Global economic prospects have been severely set back largely because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.” The World Bank agrees, saying, “It’s triggering global ripple effects through multiple channels, including commodity markets, trade, financial flows, displaced people, and market confidence. Disruptions to regional supply chains and financial networks, as well as heightened investor risk perceptions, will weaken regional growth.”

Famine, destabilization of nations, and mass migration are increasingly likely given Russia’s continued blockage of Ukrainian ports, according to David Beasley, executive director of the UN’s World Food Program. “In preventing the export of millions of tons of grain, says Beasley, Russia is declaring war on global food security,” sending the world hurtling toward hunger-induced chaos. For more than a decade, markets perennially brushed off all kinds of huge events, with faith in the Fed put to keep equities righted. This time, not so much. The benchmark S&P 500 is down more than 16% for the year through May 10. The MSCI EAFE and World Indices are both down more than 17% in dollar terms. And in the world’s second largest economy, Chinese shares are down 24% in local currency terms.

The ongoing realignment of alliances and business activity triggered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is likely to prove an even greater game-changing event than Covid. The pandemic and war together may redefine the economic geographies around which globalization and investing have been configured, which also kept inflation in check. Since his dire warning five weeks into the war, economist Niall Ferguson has turned a bit more sanguine. Omnipotent Niall Ferguson has turned a bit more sanguine.

“Perhaps Joe Biden will get his wish, and Putin will be removed from power.” But he cautions we cannot overlook the devastating options Putin still retains. “Until I am certain they will not happen, I shall remain uneasy.”

One thing is clear: Ukraine will not end the war before its access to the Black Sea is secured. This collides with current Russian military plans, likely ensuring war will continue for some time.

Further, there’s the potential the West may be forced to confront Russia’s rethinking of Ukrainian grain and prevent widespread famine. Death tolls are mounting. Escalation might quickly exceed those of the war, which in turn could trigger political turmoil around many poorer parts of the world.

At the beginning of the year, most institutional investors and allocators dismissed the likelihood of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, expressing faith that an interdependent global economy would endure. Now the core question they face is how to respond to this challenge to the status quo. That’s what this report will explore within the context of the annual survey.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this survey is to identify the limited number of funds that deliver consistently compelling performance to reveal the industry’s promise. Like previous surveys, the initial search starts in early February with various databases, including BarclayHedge and Preqin, casting a wide net across thousands of funds. They screen for only broad strategy funds. The reason: to seek out managers who consistently deliver gains with low to moderate volatility without the support or headwinds that come from specific sector, country, or specialized exposure, such as commodities, interest rates, and foreign exchange. Broad strategy funds whose performance is enhanced by exogenous leverage (e.g., 2X or “Ultra” funds) are deleted.

Requiring funds to manage at least $300 million is key to help ensure reliability of data. When funds reach that size, they frequently tap top-tier service providers — administrators, prime brokers, accountants, and lawyers — whose involvement may help deliver best-in-class practice and reporting accuracy.

The survey provides another layer of data verification by contacting each manage...
NIGHT OWL
A Long-Only Way Ahead

The 5th top-performing fund over the past 5 years through 2021 was Night Owl Composites, which generated net annualized returns of more than 27%. That topped the gains of the S&P 500 over the same period by nearly 9 percentage points a year.

The strategy has done more than ride the coattails of a long bull market since its launch in 1994; it outperformed every year the market lost money by uniquely managing risk without use of shorts and hedges.

When the S&P 500 was stung by the tech wreck during the first three years of the new millennium when it lost nearly 38%, Night Owl collectively gained 19.5%. When the Financial Crisis struck in 2008 causing stocks to crater, the strategy lost only one-third of what the market gave up. And then the market suddenly gave back its 2018 gains and then some in the fourth quarter to end the year down more than 4%, Night Owl was up 9.6%.

The $691 million strategy’s ability to preserve and enhance value is also seen by looking at quarterly performance. During positive market moves, Night Owl reports capturing nearly 90% of its gains. And when the S&P 500 falls, the strategy loses only half of what the market gives up.

Night Owls 0.82 correlation with the market over the past five years through 2021 masks the fund’s most consistent performance. Its worst drawdown (-13.5%) is 6 percentage points below the market’s and its 5-year Sharpe Ratio of 1.35 tops the market’s by 21 bps.

CIO and PM John Kim has created a fund that reflects his own multidisciplinary and contrarian thinking that cues complacency, pushing his team to constantly refine the way it thinks. He believes following algorithms and strict rules “end up acting as blenders.” Instead, Night Owl relies on a discretionary, bottom-up approach that focuses on growth. And it forgoes shorting for one simple reason: “We only focus on a few things we can do well,” explains Kim. And he doesn’t use leverage.

The fund outperforms by first focusing on a narrow universe of 100 compelling stocks. Its portfolio is a short list of no more than 25 names, with initial position size no more than 10% of book. Effectiveness of this high conviction investment approach is evident not only in performance but also with an annualized turnover of less than 15% since inception. Outperformance is also achieved by avoiding sharp hits. Kim does this by selling when he sees systemic risks building. In the second half of 2007, he saw how vulnerable the economy and market were becoming due to overvalued housing prices driven by popular sentiment that they could only go higher. So Kim started selling. By the end of the year, 80% of his book was cash.

During the summer of 2021, the team was worried about the government’s disposal of trillions of dollars in Covid relief er to confirm their numbers. While each fund feeds data directly into each database, mistakes can still happen. Data may be from a founders’ class with low fees, numbers may have been revised since submission, and classification of the fund may be wrong. UCITS and 40 Act funds can slip in. There are always a handful of managers who refuse to verify their numbers. This does not mean their data is unreliable. But it reinforces the need for prospective investors to do their own due diligence. The numbers provided here are only a starting point.

The survey’s most distinguishing filters are performance hurdles set for each of the last four years. While they are not substantial, they ensure minimum absolute returns. This enhances the survey’s value as a source of consistently performing managers regardless of what the market is doing. The hurdle was initiated in the 2019 survey prepared for The Wall Street Journal, which tracked performance over a trailing five-year period through 2018. Because 2018 was the first year in a decade when the market had lost money, requiring minimum net returns of 5% for that year was an objective way to see which funds delivered some form of alpha — and to paraphrase Warren Buffett, to reveal those managers who had shorts on when the tide went out.

That specific hurdle was again maintained in this year’s survey for 2018 and 2019. For 2020 and 2021, it was lowered to 4.5%, reflecting the decline in risk-free interest rates. The reasoning; requiring funds to generate only several hundred basis points of returns above the risk-free interest rate seems modest for any fund collecting management and performance fees. At the same time, it addresses the reality that not all strategies benefit from a roaring stock market.

The 2021 hurdle had a substantial impact on this year’s survey as it eliminated a number of venerable, highly ranked funds that had perennially made the list. They include hedged equity shops Cadian, Tiger Global, and Iger cub Wood, and macro investors Element Capital and Alphadyne. Requiring funds to straddle hurdles over the last four years while generating the best trailing five-year returns helps this survey highlight managers that are running among the most consistent absolute return funds that also contain downside risk. Further, hurdles eliminate very profitable but highly volatile funds that may bounce in and out of the red. Minimum performance standards also impose a certain discipline on funds to make the list, e.g., taking top-performing fund over the past two surveys, SoSain Partners, didn’t make the cut this year.

SURVEY RESULTS
BarclayHedge reported that over the past 5 years through 2021, the average hedge fund produced net annualized gains of 7.2% with a Sharpe Ratio of 0.86 and market correlation of 0.90.


10Y TREASURY YIELDS & EQUITIES DECOUPLING?

Source: BarclaysHedge. St. Louis Fed through 6/30/22

The Top 50 funds collectively returned annualized gains (15.5%) that were more than twice the industry’s average over the past 5 years, having trailed a raging bull market by just 3 percentage points. In
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HISTORICAL RANKINGS</th>
<th>2022 SURVEY OF THE MOST CONSISTENT PERFORMING HEDGE FUNDS†</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>2019</td>
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<td>NA</td>
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<tr>
<td>BarclaysHedge</td>
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<tr>
<td>S&amp;P 500 Total Return Index</td>
<td>Jan-80</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

† Ranked by trailing 5-year net annualized returns through 2021. 2018 ranking of 10 funds was published in The Wall Street Journal. Eric Ulrichfeld, “In Tough Times for Hedge Funds, These Are the Ones That Stood Out,” 9 May 2018. 2021-2022 ranking of the Top 50 funds was commissioned by SALT.

Due to the war and sanctions, Sweden’s Volvo Trucks expects to suffer losses of more than $400 million, US bank J.P. Morgan estimates it will likely take a $1 billion hit, and Britain’s Shell Oil expects to lose $5 billion.

- Financial Times

having nearly kept pace with the S&P 500, the Top 50 did so with significantly less risk and low market correlation. Between 2017 and 2021, the standard deviation of the Top 50 was under 11, while the S&P 500’s was over 15. The 50’s average worst drawdown during the same time was -10.7%. The market’s was nearly double that figure. No surprise the Top 50’s 5-Year Sharpe Ratio of 1.75 was more than 60 basis points higher than the market’s. A key reason allocators are willing to pay hedge fund fees is the promise of receiving attractive returns that are largely uncorrelated to the market. Over the past five years, the Top 50’s market correlation was just 0.32, which generally affirms these managers are delivering returns largely based on their own risk. Several more compelling findings: The average age of the Top 50 is 13.5 years nearly triple the life expectancy of the average fund, and they’ve been generating nearly the same annualized net returns since inception as they have over the past five years. 13.6%. Just as important, this rate of return was again achieved with significantly less risk than the market. And two-thirds of the funds on this year’s list had also made the 2021 survey, further highlighting the consistency of managers in the Top 50.

Leaders
With the exception of global macro manager Haider Jupiter and Millstreet Credit (both of which retained their high rankings from last year), this year’s top 10 funds based on the highest 5-year annualized trailing returns were equity strategies. They all delivered returns of more than 20% a year over that period, topping the market’s annualized gains of 18.5%. Two hedged equity funds that made the top 10 by avoiding large name-brand firms are small-cap activist manager Legions Partners (No. 6) and G2 Investment Partners (No. 7), which also focuses on smaller firms, sometimes before they come to market. Both funds generated 5-year annualized returns above 21%. Unlicensed Version: Not For Commercial Distribution
## 2022 SURVEY OF THE MOST CONSISTENT PERFORMING HEDGE FUNDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HISTORICAL RANKINGS</th>
<th>Fund Name</th>
<th>Launch Date</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>2016 Net Returns (Hurdle: 5%)</th>
<th>2017 Net Returns (Hurdle: 5%)</th>
<th>2018 Net Returns (Hurdle: 5%)</th>
<th>2019 Net Returns (Hurdle: 5%)</th>
<th>2020 Net Returns (Hurdle: 4.5%)</th>
<th>2021 Net Returns (Hurdle: 4.5%)</th>
<th>3-Year Annualized Net Returns (%) thru 2021</th>
<th>5-Year Annualized Net Returns (%) thru 2021</th>
<th>Annualized Net Returns (%) since inception thru 2021</th>
<th>Worst Draw Down (%) last 5 yrs thru 2021</th>
<th>5-Year Annualized Standard Deviation since inception thru 2021</th>
<th>5-Year Sharpe Ratio since inception thru 2021</th>
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<td>22.12</td>
<td>15.45</td>
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<td>Nov-00</td>
<td>MultiStrategy</td>
<td>33,200</td>
<td>43,700</td>
<td>9.03</td>
<td>19.32</td>
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<td>Waha MENA Equity Fund SP (A) (Abu Dhabi, UAE)</td>
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<td>Dynamic Alpha Strategy (Seattle)</td>
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<td>Volatility Arbitrage</td>
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<td>15.04</td>
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</table>

** NA = Performance data was not available or fund did not qualify for inclusion. 
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"Global economic prospects have been severely set back largely because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine."

- International Monetary Fund

This year was the first time Skye Global was old enough to be considered. Launched in July 2016, it grabbed the top ranking. Jamie Sterne’s equity long/short shop generated annualized returns of nearly 50% over the past five years, widely outpacing the next top-performing hedged equity manager North Peak Capital, which maintained its 2nd-place spot from last year by generating annualized gains of more than 34%. Skye Global declined to comment for this survey. But according to regulatory filings, the fund combines quantitative, cyclical, qualitative, and macro analyses, and so far clearly to remarkable success. In less than six years, it has amassed $5 billion and has soft closed. Major positions that significantly rallied, whose returns were further boosted by leverage, likely accounted for much of the fund’s remarkable gains. According to its presentation, the fund targets gross leverage between 50% and 300%, and net leverage from 0% to 120%. Before starting up Skye Global, Sterne was an equity analyst at Dan Loeb’s Third Point, with a focus on the consumer, industrial, and healthcare sectors. His first gig was an equity research analyst at Lee Ainslie’s Maverick Capital. One common trait this survey has discerned over the years is that funds generating extraordinary returns way above the mean frequently fail hard during bouts of extreme market selling. Concentration and leverage are often key factors driving sharp rises and falls. So far in 2022, a number of elite hedge equity managers (who didn’t make the survey) have been slammed around, notably BlackRock Emerging Companies, Maverick, and Tiger Global. In contrast, the Top 50 nearly 2.6% through the first quarter. Skye Global was down less than -6% for the year through March. However, subsequent reporting revealed the fund lost -24% through April, indicating (continued on p. 14)
DYNAMIC ALPHA STRATEGY

Monetizing Volatility

Compelling funds are not just those delivering attractive returns over time, but ones that also widely outpace performance of their respective strategies, revealing a distinct edge to their investment approach. Seattle-based Dynamic Alpha Strategy, with $451 million in assets, has done just this in trading volatility as a repeatable source of absolute returns. Over the past five years through 2021, this 174th-ranked fund has generated net annualized returns of more than 17%, more than doubling the average hedge fund return, outpacing the Top 50 average return, and trading a roaring bull market by just 1.3% a year. According to BarclayHedge, the average volatility trading fund returned less than 3% a year over the same period. And through the first quarter of 2022, these vol funds were collectively down more than -3%, Dynamic Alpha was up 2.7%.

Firm CEO and founder Fariba Ronnasi started in finance 29 years ago managing client assets with a strong focus on risk management. She was drawn to this facet of the business after learning at a young age how uncertain life can be. Born in Iran, she and her family fled the country without any assets just before revolution struck in 1979. They sought political asylum in the US and ended up in Seattle. After serving as a managing director in the private wealth division of ColumbiaMan, Ronnasi started Lattice Capital in 2006 to create alpha-centric alternative strategies across various asset classes. Dynamic Alpha is the firm’s flagship strategy, launched in May 2016. Its goal: to capture market inefficiencies in the highly liquid S&P 500 Index options market. It arbitrages the spread that inherently exists between implied volatility (price investors are willing to pay to hedge future volatility) and realized volatility (the value of the actual variance over the same period). Ronnasi explains the basic concept of the strategy: “We sell insurance to investors (continued on the following page)
at a slight premium to what is anticipated to be the market’s actual volatility and target sustainable yields, instead of seeking maximum gains, which would drive up risk and lower long-term performance.”

Her team has devised extensive rules in structuring a net unlevered portfolio that seeks to defend itself across a wide range of market environments. At the same time, the fund’s low collateral requirements help it avoid margin calls. This has enabled the fund to register monthly gains more than 80% of the time, and to target and realize annualized returns between 13% and 18%—all while being negatively correlated to the market.

Dynamic Alpha did, however, suffer a sudden blow in February 2020 right as Covid hit markets. That’s when its sole custodian, Jefferies, imposed strict limits on options trading. “We knew about this coming policy change,” recalls Ronnai, “and we were shifting to J.P. Morgan and Interactive Brokers to service our account.” However, as Covid triggered greater market volatility, Jefferies accelerated the removal of options exposure from its platform. “Jefferies’ actions made it more difficult for us to efficiently manage the portfolio and transfer it between custodians,” Ronnai recalls. “We were able to sidestep the volatility that hit toward the end of the month.”

The fund suffered an uncharacteristic loss of nearly 28% in February. But the strategy snapped back by more than 50% in March as markets suffered even steeper declines. “The portfolio is structurally designed to flip from short volatility in a normal market environment to long volatility that protects itself in an extreme environment,” explains Ronnai. Dynamic Alpha ended that year up 17.28%. But two idiosyncratic months, when the S&P 500 dropped 34% in March and rebounded 18.86% in April, are just two of the many examples that underscore the non-normal character of the strategy. The strategy has a long-term positive skew that is well diversified across a wide range of asset classes, as demonstrated by the Correlation vs. S&P 500 return.

Skye Global was hurt by heightened volatility triggered by rising interest rates and geopolitical risks that are slowing growth and sending net present values south. Strategies: BarclayHedge tracks performance of 20 different strategies, ranging from hedged equity and credit, to event driven and various types of arbitrage to structured credit. “While this data provides a broad sense of how individual strategies have been performing over time,” explains Ben Crawford, head of research at BarclayHedge, “they mask the wide dispersion of fund performance within each strategy.” While looking at a single year can also be misleading, 2021 revealed extraordinary breadth of strategy performance — nearly 20 percentage points (see table on p. 4). This broad look reveals a starting shift. In 2019 and 2020, hedged equity funds, especially equity long-bias, were top-performing strategies. And no surprise with the market soaring in 2021, equity long-bias turned in its best performance over the past three years with net gains of more than 17%. But distressed securi-
The pandemic and the war may be redefining the economic constellation around which globalization and investing have been configured.”

- Global Investment Report

ties grabbed the top spot in 2021, turning in gains of more than 20%. For the decade ending 2019, distressed was one of the weakest-performing strategies, registering low-single-digit returns.

The pandemic and the subsequent collapse in interest rates proved a boon for the strategy as struggling companies were able to benefit from the flood of liquidity. The strategy gained more than 13% in 2020 and more than 20% in 2021. Also benefiting from cheap and plentiful money were several structured credit strategies. Collateralized debt obligations was the third top-performing strategy, having gained 16.3%, and asset-backed securities returned more than 13%.

Credit long/short, fixed-income arbitrage, credit long-only, and fixed-income diversified rounded out the bottom of the list last year, with returns that were barely in the black. (story continues on p. 19)
Danish Economist Lars Christensen on the War and What’s Ahead for Economics & Markets

Lars Christensen, courtesy photo.

What’s your 30,000-foot view of present conditions? We’re seeing the collision of events each of which on its own would be a major matter. The pandemic, spiraling inflation, central banks way behind the curve, China locking down critical regions of its economy, and the unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine have caused devastation and soaring geopolitical tensions we haven’t seen since Hitler was Chancellor of Germany.

Did the Russian invasion surprise you and why did so many analysts get it wrong?

No. Those who were surprised by the invasion didn’t appreciate the cumulative picture Putin’s activities were painting over the past 20 years. Many characterized these actions as a nuisance, much like the US miscalculated the threat posed by al Qaeda before 9/11. And they didn’t appreciate how Putin’s circle of advisors has collapsed since 2008. This means Putin is not receiving a full presentation of reality and that’s the problem, which makes it difficult to forecast what he might do next.

What’s your perception of Putin? The commonly accepted perception of Putin as an astute five-dimensional chess player is wrong. He thinks instinctively. What distresses me so much is the whole Putin narrative, which sounds like racial war with echoes of Hitler’s concept of Lebensraum. This makes it impossible to understand the motives of the man. And no one has ever stopped him in the past. He’s behaving like a streaked thug. He’s not clever or artful enough to build a productive society. He would rather steal one.

How do you assess the West’s response so far? I’m extremely positive about the West’s united and robust response to the Russian invasion — from well-calibrated sanctions to refugee resettlement, especially after nearly two decades in which Europe struggled with how to effectively and humanely deal with the influx of refugees from war-torn Syria and Northern Africa.

Do you believe the West’s response will hold through 2022? Yes. Opinions across Europe are remarkably unified against Russia. That means politicians can more easily remain united. I believe the next step we should consider is a global import tax on Russian energy exports. A worldwide 30 percent tax on oil and coal, and a 10 percent tax on gas and proceeds could ideally be spent back to Ukraine.

Do you think NATO is seeking an efficient Ukrainian victory or to bleed the Russian military and economy? I don’t think so. It’s possible to see the West’s response has been to bleed Russia, not to seek a quick Ukrainian victory or an end to the war. A war of attrition is terrible for Ukraine. NATO officials are struggling with whether to continue these actions or stop to save Ukraine or to defend NATO. It’s probably both.

Are you optimistic about the potential outcome of the war? Putin’s horrendous mistake could lead to regime change in Russia over the next six months and possibly a new leadership that may behave less aggressively towards its neighbors. We also might see a relatively swift integration of the Ukrainian economy into Europe — much faster than had there been no war. Further, it may make the communist party in China rethink the direction President Xi has been pushing the country in a more totalitarian direction.

IMF significantly reduced its 2022 global growth estimates in response to the war. Thoughts. I am much less negative than the IMF on the impact of the war on the global economy. My fear is war will provide central banks the perfect excuse for not moving aggressively on inflation and missing their inflation targets. I’m most concerned about slowing Chinese growth due to the country’s zero-Covid policies.

You don’t believe residual pandemic issues explain much of the world’s inflation?

Economists have been wrong for more than a year. There are issues of delivery of goods and services. War is the demand and supply-side twin problem. You’ve had to stop printing money, you have to suck up liquidity, and you need to hike interest rates.

How would you assess the ECB’s response?

With Europe growing slower than the US, I’m less concerned about ECB policy being too loose. With the war happening in its own backyard and on TV in Europe 24/7, it’s very hard sitting in Frankfurt and not being influenced by the constant reporting of the war. The central bank should target interest rates so nominal demand grows in a steady, sustainable rate without causing excessive inflation.

Where and when do you think rates will peak?

US rates will possibly top out above 4 percent and eurozone above 3 percent toward the end of 2023 or early 2024. How do you expect equity markets to respond in 2022?

When there’s inflation and volatility, investors go to property and equity markets because they are good hedges against rising prices. So, right now I’m not too negative about US and European equity markets. I think the S&P 500 is about 10-15 percent overvalued — the market is still expensive but not massively overvalued. European stocks are not very expensive given the outlook for inflation, which has essentially disappeared, valuations.

Is the EU making necessary financial transfers to assist countries on the front line hosting the most refugees?

No, and don’t expect any discretionary funds to be transferred either because the EU doesn’t have the automatic mechanisms to respond like that. The silver lining is European unemployment is very low and refugees can be absorbed.

Do you think Covid, war, and now China locking down puts globalization at risk?

Governance will now get far greater attention than it once did, especially pertaining to international investments. The war is actually a strong argument for globalization. Had the world not been so integrated, then our ability to meaningfully respond to such crises would have been limited. This war shows how risky it would be to decouple from global trade because it would give up leverage in dealing with a crisis.

If the war stopped today, some estimate costs of $1 trillion or more to rebuild Ukraine. How is this going to be done?

This is going to be a massive undertaking. My first concern is the West simply pouring money into Ukraine. The country requires vastly enhanced, well-functioning democratic institutions to help deliver improvements. I’m optimistic the Ukrainian government will move in this direction after the war and learn from Poland and the Czech Republic, which undertook massive reforms in the 1990s after having gained their independence. One key: the country’s businesses need to be more integrated with the West. If that happens, don’t be surprised if rebuilding moves at an exceedingly rapid pace.

Who will be the key players rebuilding Ukraine?

The key partners will be Poland, the Baltic States, Romania, along with the Nordic countries and potentially the UK. The leading international institutions will be the IMF, the World Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Do you think EU and NATO membership for Ukraine will follow?

No. I don’t think there will be any kind of military alliance that will soon envelop Ukraine. EU membership… maybe in 15-20 years. When Ukraine is again free and independent and NATO membership is no longer needed, NATO membership will follow.

Lars Christensen specializes in international economics, emerging markets and monetary policy. He was an economic policy analyst at the Danish Ministry of Economic Affairs, then head of emerging markets research at Danske Bank. He is now the owner of the economics consultancy Markets and Money Advisory, advising large Scandinavian pension funds and European blue-chip companies.
The Top 50 funds highlight performance dispersion within individual strategies. Like last year’s survey, hedged equity was the leading strategy with 15 such funds comprising the Top 50. They collectively returned 22.5% per year over the past 5 years through 2021, more than tripling the strategy’s return. The leading hedged equity performers were the aforementioned Skyxe Global and North Peak Capital. Both were relatively recent launches, July 2016 and August 2015, respectively. And both profited very well through concentrated investments in key holdings. Driving the performance of the $1.3 billion North Peak fund, explains co-manager Jeremy Kahn, is “application of private-equity style due diligence in constructing a concentrated portfolio of 10-12 dynamic businesses trading at attractive prices.” The fund typically targets companies worth between $1 billion and $10 billion that are generating strong free cash flow and high returns on invested capital. Multistrategy had the second most funds in the Top 50. Their five-year annualized return was more than 12%, tripling the strategy’s average gain. Running $33.2 billion, Citadel Wellington (No. 13) was the largest of the top performers of the group, producing annual returns of 16% since the beginning of 2017. And the fund is one of 15 in the 2021 survey that also has made the cut in the previous three surveys, which all shared the current ranking methodology. Turning in the second-best performance was the $7 billion Schonfeld Strategic Partners (No. 21) with annualized gains of 14.3%. And the $1.2 billion Boothbay Absolute Return Strategies (No. 22) generated the third-best returns with annualized gains of 13.9%. Credit long/short funds produced annual returns of less than 3.5% over the past 5 years. However, this strategy had the third-largest number of funds in the survey: five. Collectively, they more than tripled the strategy returns with gains of 12.4% since 2017. And in contrast with the scale of multistrategy funds (among the largest in the survey), the three top-performing credit long/short funds were each running less than $900 million. The top-performer is Millstreet Credit (No. 8). The $814 million fund has made the survey each of the last four years, posting five-year annualized returns of 20.7%. London-based Gemcorp I (No. 27), managing $576 million, produced 12.3% gains. And New York-based GRC Bond Opportunity Trading (No. 32), running $526 million, delivered profits of 11.3%. Two unusual fixed-income relative value funds made the survey for the first time. Whitehaven Credit Opportunities (No. 26) invests in various municipal credits across the country, from local project and general obligations to authority and state-level paper. Enko Africa Debt (No. 18) invests in a wide range of the continent’s sovereign debt on South Africa. An important source of returns for both funds is targeting temporary mispricing between comparable bonds which managers expect will correct. Over the past five years through 2021, Whitehaven

Abu Dhabi-based Waha MENA is one of the largest hedge funds in the Middle East/North African region and one of the most consistently performing — the reason why the fund is again being profiled. While the Middle East benefits greatly from being the source of much of the world’s oil, manager Mohamed El Jamal has profited from the region’s expanding investment opportunities beyond energy. Nearly two-thirds of Waha’s book is comprised of financials and materials; one-quarter is invested in consumer discretionary and real estate. The value of this diversified approach was evident soon after the fund was launched in January 2014. Oil started a protracted slide from above $100 a barrel to $28 by the start of 2016. During this time, the fund was up more than 37%. El Jamal has sustained this performance. His five-year trailing annualized return in US dollars through 2021 was more than 17.5%, just 1 percentage point behind the S&P 500. But the manager delivered these gains with far less risk than an annual standard deviation of 6.3% — one-third less than the market. This produced a Sharp Ratio of 1.61 — significantly higher than the market’s. The fund’s worst drawdown of -14.25% was 5 percentage points less than the S&P 500’s.

One key driver of Waha’s outperformance is finding little-known but well-managed companies with sound business models, healthy balance sheets, and a proven ability to effectively allocate capital. These firms also benefit from being domiciled in countries with substantial sovereign wealth and government spending, and whose currencies are generally pegged to the US dollar.

The fund avoids momentum plays and limits purchases to undervalued shares at prices that are less likely to materially sell off. It diversifies its book across 50 to 60 stocks, with weightings typically between 2% and 4% of NAV. A select number of high-conviction investments can top out at 10% to 12%. El Jamal argues this approach to portfolio selection and weighting can also help mitigate losses. Not so long ago, MENA’s share in emerging market indices wasn’t large enough to register. Now it represents 8% of EM due to rising public offerings, foreign ownership, and market values. Deletion of Russian equities from indices also helped. Growing liquidity and liberalization of markets are enhancing the ability to short as well. All this has been creating a virtuous cycle, outlined below, that’s supporting the fund’s performance.

- Equity index flows are increasing due to rising valuations of internationally owned companies.
- Rising investments into core commodi ties, boosted by sanctions on Russian energy, are further driving rotation into the region and stock valuations and
- Greater awareness of the region’s diverse range of investment opportunities is promoting more research in non-core industries.

Emerging market assets are typically at greater risk when US interest rates rise. But El Jamal believes the prevalence of dollar-based economies and businesses in the region has so far helped shield assets against monetary tightening. Also helping: Inflation and the war are increasing dollar-priced commodities. This, in turn, encourages investors to seek shelter in the region against escalating interest rates, further supporting prices. A key sign of the times: Saudi Aramco has recently displaced Apple as the largest company in the world with a valuation of more than $2 trillion. And the state-owned oil giant is now considering a huge public offering of its trading arm, according to the Financial Times. This would follow the firm’s IPO two years ago.

While asset prices are rising in the region, El Jamal knows quantitative tightening and rising rates will eventually lower financial asset prices, pushing up risk premia and volatility. And commodity prices and global growth will cycle lower. So far, Waha MENA has held up well during 2022’s tough start, having climbed 17% in the first four months of the year, outpacing the S&P 500 by about 30%.

"With real interest rates turning positive, corporate profits will also decline, and this eventually leads to cost cutting and layoffs that will eventually slow the economy and lead to recession.” - Ken Griffin

"Waha MENA Much More Than Oil"

Portfolio Manager Mohamed El Jamal

GLOBAL INVESTMENT REPORT

2022 SURVEY OF THE TOP 50 HEDGE FUNDS

GLOBAL INVESTMENT REPORT
Why Good Funds Didn’t Make the List

The most common reason a hedge fund didn’t make this survey is due to inconsistent or lackluster returns. But some very good funds have been excluded because they didn’t meet all the thresholds for inclusion. Here are several examples I had to pass on.

Los Angeles may not be the most likely place to find a compelling hedge fund. But that’s where David Brown’s $21 billion Hawk Ridge Master fund is based. Since its launch in 2007, this small-to-mid-cap-focused equity fund has consistently delivered absolute returns, suffering only one down year in 2008. A unique part of the fund’s strategy is maintaining a steady 50% net long book, complemented with opportunistic shorts. The value-oriented, fundamentally driven manager typically avoids financials, energy, commodities, and biotech to sidestep their volatility. Hawk Ridge’s five-year net annualized returns through 2021 were 12.29%, virtually the same rate of return it has delivered since inception. But it didn’t straddle the 5% hurdle in 2018, being up 3.9% and outpacing its smaller-cap benchmark by 14%.

Concentrated funds are very appealing because they reflect a manager’s best ideas. Further, a few high-conviction investments are much easier for a manager to carefully track. New York-based DG Capital Management, with $542 million in assets, runs a concentrated version of its Value Partners fund (Class C) that’s focused typically on 10 small-cap event-driven distressed opportunities. They are made up of reorganization equity, distressed debt, and other special situations. The strategy has delivered 20.81% annualized gains over the past five years through 2021 and more than 23% since it was launched nearly a decade ago as an SMA. The strategy never had a down year, and its worst drawdown occurred when it temporarily lost a quarter of its value as the pandemic struck. Nearly 2020 ended up being a loss of 22.81%. But it didn’t make the cut because this class had only $15 million under management.

Australia’s L1 Capital, with $6 billion in assets, also makes the case for looking beyond traditional locations for fund managers. Its small- to mid-cap Global Opportunities fund, launched in June 2015, has been a remarkable performer. L1’s Miami-based manager, David Feldman, takes an equity-oriented multitarget approach to investing in the US, Europe, and Asia. The fund was up over 12% in 2018 when markets and hedge funds lost money. It has never had a down year and may have had the best performance of any fund during the core pandemic years of 2020 and 2021 when it cumulatively gained 182%. And during the rough first quarter of 2022, it was up nearly 2%. Potential investors need to understand how this idiosyncratic manager generates consistent gains. The fund’s net annualized returns over the past five years through 2021 were 37.5% But with assets of $270 million, the fund was $30 million short of the required minimum.

has generated 12.5% net annualized returns; Enko has done even better, producing yearly returns of more than 16.7%. And both funds’ returns were uncorrelated with the S&P 500.

It will be intriguing to see how these funds navigate a rising interest rate environment.

Size

Over the years this survey has frequently found smaller managers making up a large portion of the Top 50. Last year’s survey included 29 funds that were managing less than $1 billion. This year, that number declined to 27.

That said, 8 of the top 11 funds were managing under $500 million.

While many managers are small in size with large funds for their well-established research and management teams and to avoid headline risk, Jérôme Berest, head of alternatives at the $101 billion Zurich-based EFG International, also sees merit looking into smaller funds.

“Such managers with proven track records of more than five years,” explains Berest, “can offer certain advantages over their larger brethren. They are able to access a much greater part of the investment universe — from mega-cap to micro-cap — and are less likely to affect prices as much as larger funds might. And with their holdings often distinct from major market positions, performance of some smaller funds tends to have less market beta,” notes Berest.

While several large funds dropped off this year’s list, including Tiger Global and Element Capital, the 2022 survey still hosts some very big shops. They have helped push up the average fund size from last year’s $3.1 billion to $3.4 billion. Nineteen funds now manage between $1 billion and $5 billion and another 6 funds have over $5 billion in assets.

Risks and Opportunities

The sharp rise in volatility and uncertainty — the common theme threading through manager and allocator interviews — has produced bifurcated responses.

“…I think we’re in one of those very difficult periods where simple capital preservation is the most important thing we can strive for.”

- Paul Tudor Jones

SOURCE COMMODITY PRICES

Oil supply vs. price

EU fertilizer price

US fertilizer price

Source: Bakker Hughes, Bloomberg, GIAM

Source: Green Markets, Bloomberg, GIAM

Source: Bloomberg, GIAM

Source: Bloomberg, GIAM
Many have turned increasingly cautious, evidenced by the general reduction in leverage and net exposure (see graph on p. 27).

But recalling F. Scott Fitzgerald’s quip, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function,” some of the thickest-headed managers are profitting from suppression triggered by rising interest rates and commodities and falling stock and bond indices.

Case in point is the $4.4 billion hedge fund group Citadel. Its three leading funds, all in the Top 50, have turned in strong first quarters while the S&P 500 was losing -6.6%. Multistrategy Wellington was up nearly 5%, quantitative equity tactical climbed more than 6%, and the macro-oriented Global Fixed Income delivered nearly 10% — all while the firm’s founder is keenly aware of risks that lie ahead.

Citadel’s Ken Griffin thinks recession is inevitable, triggered by high inflation and the need to bring interest rates up sharply. He explains doing so will cut into the very high net present value of growth stocks whose valuations were significantly predicated on cheap money.

“With real interest rates turning positive,” says Griffin, “corporate profits will also decline, and this eventually leads to cost cutting and layoffs that will eventually slow the economy and lead to recession.” In this environment, he sees value shares holding up better than growth (see graph to the left).

If US growth does indeed stall, David Kelly, chief global strategist at J.P. Morgan Asset Management, thinks a recession will probably be far milder than those that were brought on by the Financial Crisis and the pandemic. “It would likely be deep enough to mop up inflation pressures and curtail job openings,” posits Kelly, “but not bad enough to damage the long-term prospects of the economy overall or most companies operating within it. In time, growth would resume, margins would recover and markets would rebound.”

But Paul Tudor Jones thinks we’re in for more challenging times, “where simple capital preservation is the most important thing we can strive for.” Jones is clearly referencing the hazardous simultaneous de-

HEDGE FUND INVESTING IN RUSSIA

Before 2022, many emerging market fund managers were intrigued by Russia. From 2010 through 2021, the local benchmark stock index, MOEX, nearly tripled in value in local currency terms. It has given back nearly two-thirds of that from February through April. And veteran emerging market investor Mark Mobius, founder of Mobius Capital Partners, believes, “it will be impossible to invest in Russia for a long time.”

Institutional Investor reported in early April a significant number of funds, all under $2 billion and many quite small — well under $500 million — had exposure to Russian equities of between 10 and 20 percent. More than 10 funds had between 20 and 40 percent exposure, while four funds had 40 to 70 percent exposure — including a number of funds from Fidelity Management, which is exclusively focused on emerging markets.

A longtime colleague and emerging market hedge fund manager, who has an extensive track record of generating consistent returns while effectively managing risk, provides ground-level insight about investing in Russia. Because of the subject and his firm’s reticence for press, he provides his thoughts anonymously.

He’s been investing in Russia for many years. In 2021, with commodity prices rebounding, he saw a number of compelling blue-chip Russian energy and financials-based on attractive corporate finances, valuations, growth prospects, and dividends. “These companies rely on global auditors, along with a maturing and liquid market,” he explained, the fund manager. “We had a reasonable degree of comfort to invest in Russian equity.”

In the energy space, he liked Gazprom and Lukoil. He was also bullish on Sberbank, which, before the war, was trading at book value, with a return on equity of 24%, and a dividend of more than 7%.

However, in the lead-up to invasion, the manager cut his significant exposure to Russia by two-thirds. His weighting moved inversely with the number of Russian troops massing around Ukraine’s borders. He did this despite widespread optimism among his Russian-based financial sources that war was unlikely. Other asset managers he spoke with shared a similar optimistic sentiment.

Why was he cautious? “In seeing equity prices declining and uncertainty rising, I didn’t see any compelling reason to maintain significant exposure to Russia. I could almost recite” these positions,” he wrote. “This decision exceeded the manager’s normally low risk to limit shocks to his portfolio.”

As Russia became financially isolated, it halted foreign trading of local securities, and hedge funds stopped working. Before sanctions took effect, sufficient liquidity enabled shorting of large-cap Russian stocks and ETFs. Russian credit default swaps were visible hedges.

It was the first time the manager could recall when hedging in a reasonably evolved market failed and where bankruptcy could be triggered because custodians couldn’t make payments to creditors. The manager posits that rating agencies and courts may have a problem identifying reasons for pending defaults: Were they caused by violation of international law and the imposition of sanctions or by an inability to pay?

Even before such a reckoning is made, many institutional investors completely wrote off their losses, including the likes of Fidelity, T. Rowe Price, and UBS. This manager did the same. The question they all face is what to do with these assets.

Russian capital markets have re-opened. But foreign investors can’t trade them. And if foreign investors attempt to execute a trade with a non-Russian party, they currently get nickels or dimes on the dollar.

The manager believes Russian blue-chip companies are worth more than what foreign investors can now receive for them. “It makes sense for the time being to hold on to these positions,” he explains. “The question is not one of valuation but whether Russia will be an investable market in the future, even if Putin is no longer in charge.”

The matter has gotten more muddled for investors who held global depositary receipts of Russian companies in their respective local markets and currencies. Russia recently canceled these GDRs, transforming them into nuble-denominated shares.

How will this all play out? The manager’s best guess is that two outcomes for Russian shares will evolve: one for higher-priced domestic Russian investors; the other for foreign investors whose shares will be worth much less. Arbitrage that normally keeps the prices of such dual listings in balance when markets are fungible will likely benefit only Russian investors.

While it’s hard to see an end to the current crisis, the manager reminds us, “Russia has a lot more to offer the world than hacking, assassination, and war. It’s home to remarkable creativity in the arts, music, literature, and science. It’s an important commodities market and is developing other sectors, including technology.”

“But in a single, mindless action, the government has erased decades of market improvements. The Russian economy will not be embraced by the West for quite some time and only when the Kremlin turns less belligerent, committing itself to being part of the world order rather than seeking to break it.”

Mindful of Russian history, it might take a while for that to occur.
cline in equities and bonds — something markets have never seen before (see graph on p. 6).

Since the 1960s, according to the $151 billion asset manager Man Group, “there have been 44 individual instances of the S&P 500 Index enduring five or more consecutive down weeks. Since 1973, US Treasuries have had 31 such losing streaks lasting at least five weeks. Yet these prolonged sell-offs,” Man observes in a recent note, “had never coincided — until the start of May.”

This disconcerting alignment is also a big deal to EFG’s Jérôme Berzet. He explains, “these trends are telling us markets are bracing for slowing growth while central banks have little choice but to tighten monetary policy to break the current inflation spiral.” Berzet thinks the collision of these opposing trends will generate significant dispersion. “Digging deeper into sectors, industries, and individual companies can tell a different story — some worse, others better,” explains Berzet. “Such differentiation creates idiosyncratic opportunities that passive investing won’t be able to pick up on.”

Thinking this is more than markets adjusting to various stresses, Berzet believes “we’re entering an inflection point triggered by Covid, war, and rising interest rates which collectively will challenge the efficacy of traditional ETF passive investing in long equity and bond indices.” Berzet argues this is making the case for alternatives that can better navigate the strong trends that are hitting both stocks and bonds by “identifying positions that will benefit from the shifting macroeconomic landscape both regionally and globally.”

Toward that end, he’s combining systematic CTAs and discretionary macro managers along with market neutral, event driven, relative value, and distressed strategies to better handle the turbulence we’re heading into while delivering consistent absolute returns.

Dispersion on a more global level will also be enhanced by diverging monetary policies, according to Nathanael Benzaken, head of alternatives at Paris-based Amandis AM, which manages €2 trillion. He oversees €20 billion in hedge funds.

Though inflation is now comparably high in both Europe and the US, Benzaken thinks the impact of war along with slower European growth is resulting in distinct monetary responses by the ECB and the Fed. While he believes Europe and the US will experience sustained interest rate hikes, Benzaken thinks, “there will be a disconnect between European Central Bank and Fed behavior.”

With ECB Deposit Facility Rates currently at –0.50%, he doesn’t project overnight rates to turn positive this year. To help drive uncorrelated returns in this increasingly challenging environment, Benzaken is also relying on CTAs and discretionary global macro managers.

And to exploit growing dispersion, he’s also targeting special situations, merger arbitrage, credit, and relative value managers.

The European Central Bank’s unclear response to inflation “is confirmation the war has further delayed European recovery,” according to Filippo Casagrande, head of Insurance Investment Solutions with €2.5 billion in hedge fund investments at the €885 billion Generali Asset and Wealth Management. He believes after the current spate of negative news filters through continental shares, Europe may become a compelling investment destination.

But until then, Casagrande is directing new money into the US. “While the US isn’t immune from the slew of negative global forces, the country does appear to be best positioned to weather the current turbulence, especially since its economy was already rallying before the war started, is largely energy independent, and is far more removed from the fighting.”

(Noted in early June, well after these interviews were conducted, ECB President Christine Lagarde surprised markets by suggesting a more aggressive stance. She signaled near-term rates could rise by as much as 75 bps. That would be 50 bps more than had been anticipated.)

BlackRock’s CEO sees another systemic factor that will further drive inflation and interest rates. Larry Fink believes the Russian invasion of Ukraine may be triggering “an end to the globalization we have experienced over the last three decades.” He fears this will leave many communities and people feeling isolated

(continued on the following page)
and looking inward, exacerbating “the polarization and extremist behavior we are seeing across society today.”

Generalissimo Casagrande also sees increased movement toward deglobalization. He fears this will not only drive prices higher, but could eventually lead us towards the hyperinflation of the late 1960s and 1970s. If economies trend in that direction, Casagrande says it would fundamentally alter investment analysis and selection.

While we’re not there yet, Casagrande continues to de-risk his exposure. He’s targeting low-to-negative correlation to both equity and bond markets through event driven, credit long/short, volatility trading, and market neutral managers. Cédric Dingens, head of investment solutions and alternative investments at the CHF10 billion Swiss-based NS Partners, sees any material move away from globalization as a major risk to the world’s second-largest economy. He says, “This would be on top of the negative effects of China’s Zero-Covid policy, the possibility war-related sanctions may morph over to the mainland, and leadership’s decision to delist companies from foreign exchanges, which is further reducing liquidity and increasing uncertainty about the Chinese experiment.”

Dingens has reduced exposure to the region and says, “We need to regain greater transparency before we commit more resources to the country.”

Danish economist Lars Christensen is a bit more sanguine, believing the war in fact makes the argument for globalization. “Had the world not been so integrated,” says Christensen, “then our ability to meaningfully respond to such crises would have been limited. This war in fact shows how risky it would be to decouple from global trade because it would give up leverage in dealing with a crisis.”

He also thinks Russia’s senseless invasion has highlighted the need for companies and nations to focus more rigorously on governance, especially pertaining to international investments. He believes this greater awareness should lead to shrewder geopolitical decision-making and alliances, rewarding more benign governments.

So Far in 2022

As allocators hoped, the top-performing funds this year have been trend-following strategies. These include global macro and diversified commodity trading advisors that are latch- ing onto the strong moves in interest rates, bond and stock indices, commodities, and exchange rates. BarclaysHedge reports through May, global macro and CTAs have climbed 8.5% and 8%, respectively. Several global macro funds in the Top 50 have generated the strongest returns in the first quarter. John Street Capital (No. 29) was up nearly 9.5%. Citadel Global Fixed Income (No. 34), whose execution relies substantially on global macro calls, rose nearly 10%.

The standout has been the unerringly cosmic performance of Haider Jupiter that has realized gains of nearly 150% over the first three months of the year, likely by turbocharging these strong trends with substantial leverage. (The fund refused to comment for this report.)

Emerging market funds were the worst, off by -11%. However, the two such funds in the Top 50 have so far managed better through the first quarter. Asia-focused Fenghe was down -7.6% while Wahs Mena gained more than 4%. Even frontier market Enko Africa Debt fund limited losses to -3.6%.

Current Thinking

Vega Capital (No. 9), has generated 20% annualized returns since its launch more than a decade ago. (See sidebar on p. 26.)

Hedged equity manager Travis Cooke acknowledges the risks brought about by high inflation, rising interest rates, supply chain problems, and war. But his take is more benign than most other PMs.

He actually prefers investing when the Fed will not likely intervene to support markets by cutting interest rates. This forces stocks to be increasingly priced more on their own merits, says Cooke, “creating a more realistic market environment with increased volatility enhancing bottom-up stock selection.”

The manager sees attractive opportunities in select value and growth shares due to the “market over-reaction to rising interest rates, especially given how low they were to begin with.” Still seeing high levels of profitability, relatively low leverage, and solid free cash flow, he thinks investor expectations are overly dour given the generally healthy state of consumers and the economy.

Night Owl (No. 5), which has been around since 1994 having generated annualized returns of more than 15%, is responding to the growing financial threats by raising cash. (See sidebar on p. 5.)

CIO and PM John Kim has significantly outperformed the market not by altering net exposure and leverage but by reducing dollars invested when there’s systemic risk. This has helped his equity long-only fund consistently outperform markets when they are down.

He went to 60% cash during the height of the Great Recession. And at the end of May, half of his book was in cash.

His current thinking: “Fed policy, seeking to reduce demand, will bring down earnings and multiples that were too high.” When

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Ramius Merger: A High-Yield Alternative

Ramius (No. 50) is among the most consistently performing merger arbitrage funds. Over the past five years through 2021, its annualized returns of 7.54% were nearly 2 full percentage points higher than the average M&A fund, according to BarclayHedge. Since the fund’s inception in January 2013, it has delivered gains of 7.8% with volatility under 19, a warrant drawdown of less than 15%, and it has never had a down year. Further, it’s the only pure merger arb fund that qualified for this year’s survey. This $320 million strategy has the unique support of a large asset manager, Cowen, its parent with assets of $15.8 billion, provides access to additional research and institutional support, from operations and technology, to accounting and client relations.

Ramius is an example of a hedge fund not intentionally targeting high-octane returns. Instead, explains PM Ethan Johnson, its strategy is a compelling alternative for high-yield fixed-income investors with lower durations. “As an absolute return strategy that targets spread of signed deals,” says Johnson, “we have less market exposure than traditional hedged equity funds.” This is borne out by Ramius having outperformed the S&P 500 during 87% of the months the index was down. And during 58% of these down months, the strategy had made money. This includes September and November of 2021, and the first quarter of 2022 when the strategy was up nearly 3% as the market sold off.

Johnson credits the strategy’s steady returns to disciplined research and decision-making process that pursues only a limited number of deals at a time, mostly in the States and a few in Europe. He explains, “greater deal exposure doesn’t correlate to superior returns; but M&A involving targets valued at more than $1 billion, where spreads tend to be wider, helps.” Advanced Micro Devices’ recent purchase of Xilinx for $49 billion, the largest chip deal ever, is an extreme example. At one point, Johnson said, “gros spread had exceeded 25% due to uncertainty about the deal closing, insufficient arbitrage capital to close spreads, and concerns about China granting regulatory approval required due to the country’s supply chain links to both companies.” Ramius had made the deal a core position.

Targeting significant exposure to only a limited number of larger deals produces a concentrated fund. “There might be anywhere from 100 to 150 deals happening at a given time,” says Johnson, “but our top 10 positions typically represent from 50% to 70% of book.” He then adds two times leverage on long positions to enhance gains.

Optimizing position selection and timing is also something that keeps performance steady. “We accomplish this just by assessing risk and reward in this yield-minus-space,” Johnson explains, “but by also timing in time.”

The strategy can find opportunities in relatively short periods when spreads look exceedingly wide. Occasionally, it will bet a deal may break. But when Johnson has a greater conviction a deal will close, he may stay in for a longer time to capture more upside. These decisions are all part of a discretionary process that has produced an average duration of 4 months.

With growing investor uncertainty being driven by inflation, rising interest rates, and mounting geopolitical risks, Johnson has a mixed view of the market. Current volatility can limit deal-making over the short term. But given the extensive selloff going on, the manager is seeing an increasing number of potential targets. “Companies that have been tracking firms whose share prices have collapsed, may soon want to pull the trigger, and targeted companies that are hurting may be more inclined to merge to revive their fortunes.”

“With the June CPI numbers showing no letup in inflation across the board, things could become very ugly as we head toward recession by the end of the year.”

- Jeffrey Grownwy, Millstreet Capital

S&P US High-Yield Corporate Bond Index 1H2022

Source: Standard and Poor's

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This is evident in the S&P US High-Yield Corporate Bond Index, which has lost more than 10% in little more than five months in 2022. (See graph above.) With little reason to believe the fallout will decelerate as interest rates continue to
ENKO AFRICA DEBT FUND

Unexpected Alpha

A fascinating aspect of this survey is coming across managers who've developed strategies that successfully target more obscure corners of the market. In focusing on Africa's frontier sovereign debt (ex-South Africa), London-based Enko has done just that. The $530 million US dollar-denominated fund (No. 18) has generated net annualized returns of nearly 16% with annual standard deviation of less than 4% since its inception in 2016.

Co-founder and CIO Alain Nkontchou, who cut his teeth as a portfolio manager at J.P. Morgan and BlueCrest Capital and was also a managing director at J.P. Morgan and Credit Suisse, sees potential in Africa's local and hard currency debt for the same reasons many investors avoid them.

“It’s because Africa's $600 billion dollar markets is not very liquid with limited off-

Nkontchou, "it that produces structural and idiosyncratic inefficiencies that create

Sample sovereign targets in which Enko invests include those issued by Kenya, Egypt, Angola, and Ivory Coast.

Reticence around investing in frontier securities is based on the perception that reporting, accounting, and governance are not up to developed market standards. Enko defies these macro and macro data concerns, explains Nkontchou, by combining research conducted by major global banks, supra-nationals, (including the IMF and World Bank), and its own proprietary research.

Moreover, Nkontchou adds, "African debar nations know that their reporting has been tracked and measured for reliability, and to continue tapping capital markets, it's crucial for them to show continual improvement in the flow and caliber of information released."

To preserve capital and enhance returns, the fund studies credit, currency, and equity

and liquidity risk in structures that carry short exposure and duration. As a

Trust to the indirect risks on its team of the benefits and limitations of local economic and sovereign

situations, and the support of well-established banks that provide help ensure

The current African sovereign spreads are high enough to trade on

bonds and dollar-based traded bonds over the continent in London. Because these

markets are thinly traded, they tend to be volatile when local or global events

hit. This means bond prices often fluctuate

Well beyond their inherent value. The

fund recently observed a sell-off in Kenyan bonds, driven by rising global uncer-

tainies. This pushed their current yields

3% above yields of Kenya's local currency sovereign bonds.

Nkontchou found an effective way to ex-

tract value while containing risks through

a fixed-income relative value trading. His

ploy involves setting up trade pairs between

local currency and euro-denominated versions of the same issuer, as well as

between dollar-based sovereign debt different countries offering similar yields but with

different risk profiles. The fund further manages risk using foreign exchange, interest

rate and macro hedges, and altering net

leverage that averages around 50%.

These arbitrage trades,” explains Nkon-

chou, “help absorb volatility, and combi-

ned with carry interest, are sources of the

fund’s returns.”

Rising prices and interest rates are usually

harmful for emerging and frontier markets, and according to the Economist, they could

collide with large bond principle payments coming due in 2024.

However, Nkontchou says his team iden-

tifies markets where higher US interest rates and a strengthening dollar may be

beneficial than in others. “Certain Af-

rican countries are benefiting from soaring commodity prices, often traded in US dol-

lars. He notes in particular those economies that are

Now, the challenge is figuring how to effec-

tively manage various global forces hitting securities in all markets.