Deutsche Bank Research



Economics

Fed Notes

What a Warsh nomination would mean for the Fed

Introduction

On Friday, President Trump indicated that the Fed chair race may be down to two names – Kevin Hassett, who was the presumptive front-runner in recent weeks after news reports suggested he had become the favorite, and Kevin Warsh. In a recent note we discussed the potential implications of a Hassett-run Fed (see "What a Hassett nomination would mean for the Fed"). This built on an earlier note where we laid out more general considerations for the next Fed chair (see "The next focus for markets: Powell's replacement").

Warsh's candidacy

Warsh has a strong pedigree to be chair of the Federal Reserve, with a background broadly similar to Chair Powell. Unlike Hassett, who is a PhD economist, Warsh is a lawyer who has had an impressive mix of experience in the public and private sectors. On the public side, Warsh was a governor at the Federal Reserve from 2006 through 2011, a period that spanned the Fed's response to the GFC. During that period, he served as an important liaison between the Fed and markets.

On the private side, Warsh has held various roles, including currently as a partner at Stan Druckenmiller's family office, Duquesne. In addition to this role, Warsh has served as the Shepard Family Distinguished Visiting Fellow in Economics at the Hoover Institution and lecturer at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

Warsh's Fed critiques

During recent years he has been particularly critical of the Federal Reserve. His criticisms span short-term policy decisions – for example, continuing QT and rate hikes in late 2018 despite shaky markets and the 50bp reduction last September – as well as longer-term considerations for the central bank, which he outlined in a speech this year at an IMF lecture hosted by the G30 (see here).

Warsh has been consistently critical of the Fed's more aggressive use of its balance sheet over the past 15 years. Although he supported the Fed's initial foray into QE in response to the GFC, he cautioned that later programs were not appropriate, possibly raising inflation and financial stability risks, as well as moving the Fed away from its core duties and into credit allocation policies that could distort market signals. As he noted recently, "I worried mightily in the summer and fall of 2010-- a time of strong growth and financial stability –that the decision to buy more treasury bonds—would involve the Fed in the messy political business of fiscal policy. QE2 was announced. I disagreed with the decision, and

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resigned from the Fed soon after." Although Warsh spoke out against QE2 at the November 2010 meeting (see transcript here), he ultimately did not dissent.

Warsh has further argued that the Fed's active use of its balance sheet may have brought about a period of "monetary dominance". By artificially depressing rates for extended periods, Warsh argues the Fed has played an important role in enabling US government debt accumulation.

Beyond the balance sheet, Warsh has levied a variety of criticisms on the Fed. For example, he argues that the Fed has been consistently too data dependent and not forward looking enough. At the same time, Warsh has been critical of the Fed's regular use of forward guidance. He recently noted, "forward-guidance – a tool rolled out to great fanfare in the financial crisis—has little role to play in normal times."

Warsh also questioned various other aspects of how the Fed has set and/or justified monetary policy, including incorrectly believing that: "monetary policy had nothing to do with money", "black-box DSGE models were anchored in reality", and "the surge of Putin and the pandemic were blameworthy for inflation rather than the surge of government spending and printing." These criticisms could imply that Warsh wants to put more focus on the Fed's balance sheet size and money supply in the conduct of monetary policy and could also be open to overhauling the Fed research staff.

Finally, while he has described Fed independence as a "worthy" cause, he has also argued that the Fed has brought upon itself questions about independence. Warsh noted, "the Fed's outsized role and underperformance have weakened the important and worthy case for monetary policy independence." Further, Warsh denounced mission creep at the Fed, including considering issues related to climate and inclusion.

What Warsh could mean for near-term policy

As with all chair candidates at this point, Warsh would be nominated by a president who has pushed heavily for steep rate cuts. Indeed, during the appearance where Trump noted that the race could be down to Hassett and Warsh, the President also argued that US rates should be near the lowest in the world, given the US's premier credit standing. Specifically, he argued for rates closer to 1%, a level he has referenced on several occasions.

Although Warsh has argued for lower rates recently, we do not view him as structurally dovish. His views while he was a Governor around the GFC at times skewed more hawkish than his colleagues, particularly on the balance sheet. More recently, he did not support the Fed's 50bp reduction last September.

On policy decisions, Warsh's recent comments suggest he could support lower policy rates, possibly counterbalanced by a smaller balance sheet. However, with reserves already at ample and the Fed recently restarting Reserve Management Purchases (RMPs), this trade-off would only be feasible if regulatory changes are made that lower banks' demand for reserves. While several Fed officials have made this argument recently, including Vice Chair of Supervision Bowman and Governor Miran, it is not obvious these changes are realistic in the near-term.

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Bigger picture, regardless of President Trump's choice, the market could look to test the next Fed chair's independence and the credibility of his commitment to achieving the inflation target. These bona fides always need to be earned by an incoming chair. The requirement could be more acute in the current context, with the President's calls for steep Fed rate cuts. For this reason, we remain skeptical that policy will change in a discrete way in June once the leadership handoff takes place, especially since the chair has just one vote amongst a particularly divided committee.





Appendix 1

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