

School for
Humans

Now that we have AI, what are the arts for?

Cultivating minds that can question, interpret and imagine will always matter. That's how students find their voice.

Usha Chandradas

It is 9am on a rainy Tuesday on campus and I am trying to buy a coffee. Term has officially ended so I am the only one in line.

After a while, the sole barista on duty notices me, points to the QR code on the wall, and says: "Scan to order."

We could have had a conversation. But no other word passes between us because the hyper-efficient QR code has already done the talking. It almost feels like a small piece of performance art, two people in the same space but interacting on entirely different planes of existence.

The morning with the barista brought to mind what I have been seeing in my own classrooms, where the technology at play is generative artificial intelligence, or Gen AI.

When technology steps in to do uncomfortable or effortful work for us, many of us are only too ready to let it. In the cafe, it replaces simple human exchange. In the classroom, it can serve to replace the far more difficult work of thinking and critical engagement.

I allow my university-level students to use Gen AI within certain limits, on the basis that these tools will be available to them in the working world. Responsible educators, in my view, have to teach their students what these technologies mean and how they can be used.

I thought I found a way around Gen AI overuse by introducing debating in class. The rapid-fire exchange and quick repartee would spur the students to think on the spot and speak directly without referring to AI-generated notes or resources, I thought.

This worked well for a few semesters. But in recent classes, students show no qualms about sitting down mid-debate, typing the questions into their Gen AI tools, and reading the answers out directly from the laptops and other devices. What I had assumed would be anti-social behaviour seems well accepted by

most of the class.

It made me wonder what we can do better to raise a generation confident in their own abilities, and not so over-reliant on Gen AI that they risk rendering themselves irrelevant.

A stronger footing in the arts or some exposure to them could be the answer. It may sound like a trite proposition, but an arts education trains the imagination and widens one's sense of what is possible.

LESSONS FROM THE DEBATES

During the debates, I noticed that my foreign students, despite their difficulties with English, were more willing to not use their notes and attempt to engage in impromptu speaking. Only a

We can harness these benefits in the age of Gen AI by ensuring that arts education is treated as a core component of holistic education, and that access to such education is both broad-based and egalitarian. In a world where it is simpler than ever to vanish behind screens, and to type never-ending questions into ChatGPT, the arts remind us how to stay present, how to look up and how to meet the person in front of us.

handful of local students were adventurous enough to give it a go.

So why the discrepancy? One reason perhaps is the Singaporean obsession with grades and examination results. Despite many tweaks to the education system, stress and panic over grade metrics continue to hang over many students.

When education is seen as nothing more than a ticket to a job, it becomes logical to produce the most technically accurate answer with the least amount of fuss. Gen AI use seems like a no-brainer, especially if there are student loans to service, or anxiety about finding jobs in a turbulent world.

Another reason is possibly discomfort and lack of confidence in using the English language. If the robots can spit out sentences

that seem polished and technically sound, it is easy to wrongly conclude that the content must be accurate.

For students worried about jobs, the world of Gen AI actually looks full of interesting possibilities and new roles that have yet to even be created.

But technical ability on its own is never enough, and the best programmers often think a little like artists. Researchers have found, for example, that when engineers work alongside design students, the work they produce is more inventive.

The irony is, you cannot hope to be a thoughtful developer of code if you lose the very creative instincts and critical thinking that excessive Gen AI use can slowly wear down.

The arts, through their various forms, help nurture those instincts, building important human traits in the process.

FINDING ONE'S VOICE THROUGH LITERATURE AND DRAMA

For instance, a better grasp of the English language can be achieved through close reading, practical criticism and the deeper study of literature.

Mr William Phuan, executive director of the Singapore Book Council, advises: "Anyone who wants to use Gen AI in an effective way and to stay ahead of the curve will need to know how to process and critically review the data they are examining. An education in literature provides these basic skills to students, which future-proof them for any disruption."

Confidence, empathy and teamwork can also be found in the performing arts. Many, including myself, have called for drama to be woven more fully into the primary and secondary school curriculum.

A campaign that advocated drama education having a greater presence in Singapore's primary school curriculum drew positive responses that were "powerful and remarkably consistent". This was shared by Ms Aishwariyah Shanmuganathan, president of the Singapore Drama Educators Association, the organisation behind the initiative. She said: "Many shared that drama helped them become more confident speakers. Several described entering drama as shy or withdrawn children – some even victims of bullying – but taking on roles, performing in front of others, or joining drama clubs gave them a safe space to step out of their shell."

Ms Kamini Ramachandran, a teaching artist – a practising artist who teaches her art form – and storyteller, shared that a student once told her how storytelling let her try to be a braver version of herself, and that "teachers regularly report similar shifts through character analysis, rehearsal discipline and reflective storytelling".

Taken together, these accounts point to something that Gen AI cannot supply on its own: a sense of self that is earned through struggle, practice, rehearsal and risk-taking. Literature and drama do not come easy, and that is precisely the point. They give students the language, confidence and imaginative range to think for themselves, through the messy and at-times embarrassing process of trial and error.

LESSONS FROM DANCE AND MUSIC

Dance reveals the same. To put it simply, there is no discreet way to hide in a dance class: Your body becomes the tool expressing your point of view, and it has to show up, even on days when you feel awkward and unsure.

Learning to move with others, and accordingly, to misstep, adjust,

and try again, builds a kind of confidence that cannot be outsourced or automated.

Mr Edwin Wee, creative director and co-founder of dance company Decadance Co, told me: "The physical nature of a dance class pushes one to interact with others sharing the same space, building the capacity to increase confidence and empathy, and to support our peers and community."

"None of this comes instantly, which means soft skills like patience and discipline are also being enhanced."

Music, too, teaches students ways to express themselves beyond words.

Mr Chua Zhihao, educator and orchestra manager of the Asian Cultural Symphony Orchestra, explained that learning an instrument and performing often requires immense resilience and hard work.

"In a wind band, the band is as good as its weakest player. Everyone plays a part, and everyone needs to know what others are playing – if one does not do their job well, it affects the rest of the team."

Professor Kwok Kian Woon, vice-chancellor of the University of the Arts Singapore, said in a recent speech that while leveraging AI, we should still make time and effort for "thinking through the difficult issues at hand, formulating new questions, exercising our capabilities for reading and analysing all kinds of materials – texts, data, arguments, images – slowly, closely and deeply".

Most of the arts educators I spoke to tend to use Gen AI as more of a practical tool for administrative assistance.

As an educator, I have taken these as good reminders to lean on Gen AI tools when they can lighten a burdensome load, but not for the work that needs imagination, discernment or a point of view.

A CASE FOR STAYING HUMAN

The arts aren't meant to be a sentimental counterweight to more "practical subjects". We need to be more deliberate about their role in education. Reading closely, arguing about meaning, and learning to sit with uncertainty rather than rushing towards the most polished answer.

In drama, music and dance, it means showing up at rehearsals, practising with others in real time, and learning that true improvement is something that is slow, uneven and deeply personal.

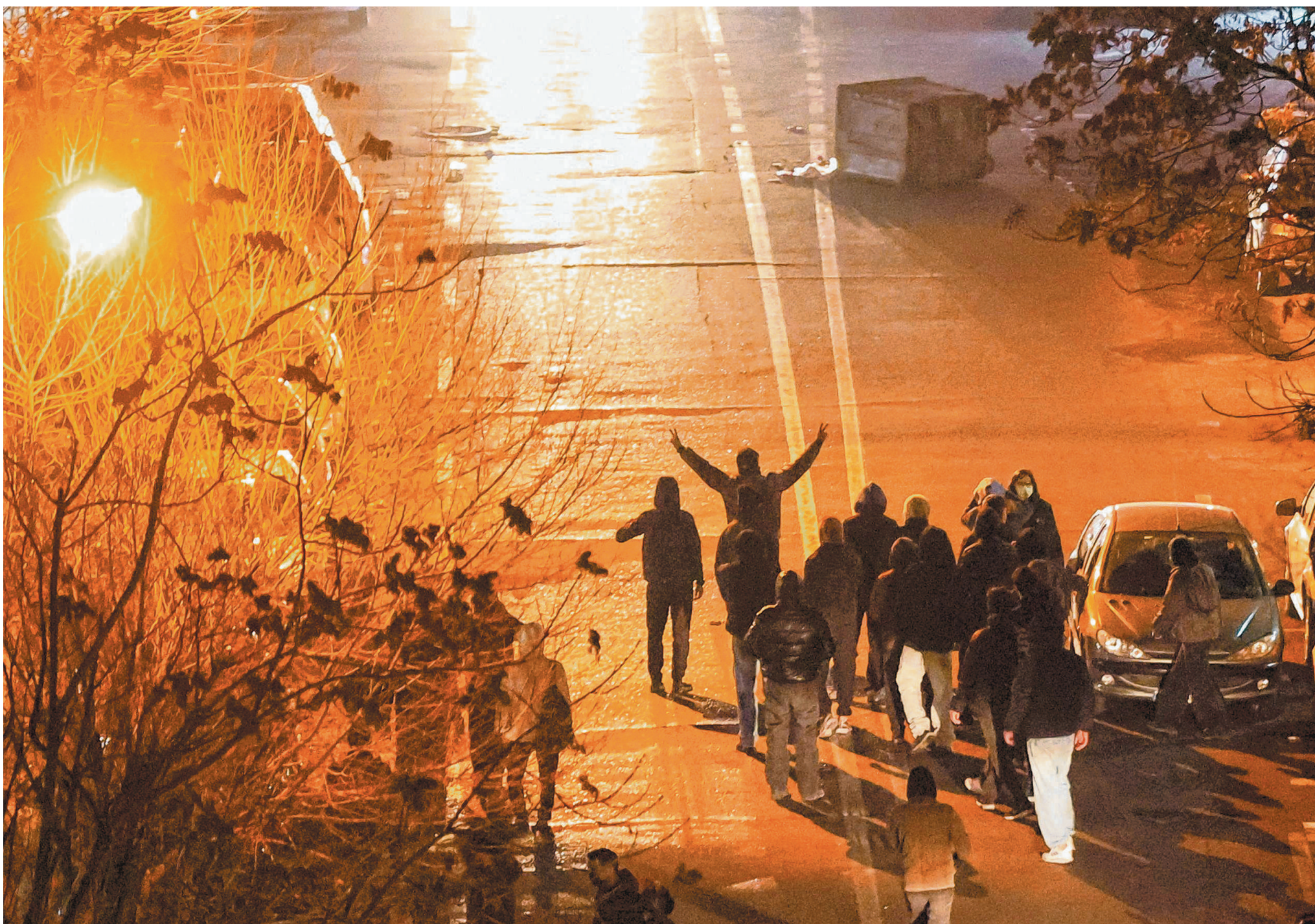
These experiences train students to make better judgments, to tolerate discomfort, and to take responsibility for what they produce. We can harness these benefits in the age of Gen AI by ensuring that arts education is treated as a core component of holistic education, and that access to such education is both broad-based and egalitarian.

In a world where it is simpler than ever to vanish behind screens, and to type never-ending questions into ChatGPT, the arts remind us how to stay present, how to look up and how to meet the person in front of us.

Whether they're debating a point in class, or just making a coffee on a rainy Tuesday morning.

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School for Humans is a new Opinion series in January that explores the conversations around education and highlight the human forces at the heart of teaching and learning.



Demonstrators in Tehran protesting about the collapse of the Iranian currency's value on Jan 8. There is no love lost between Arab regimes and the Islamic republic. But after two years of regional war, many Middle Eastern governments now fear that unrest in Iran will lead to more chaos rather than less. PHOTO: REUTERS

Why Arab states are silent about Iran's unrest

They might welcome the Islamic republic's collapse, but dread what would follow.

The last time Iran was convulsed by nationwide protests, in 2022, the Arab world was transfixed. The Islamic republic had spent decades building a network of powerful allies that came to dominate the region. Many Arabs wondered if the prospect of regime change in Tehran offered a chance to throw off Iran's yoke in their own countries.

Pan-Arab news outlets, often funded by Gulf monarchies, egged on the protests with sympathetic, round-the-clock coverage. Arab diplomats kept their counsel in public but sounded ebullient in private.

At one point, Major-General Hossein Salami, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, accused Saudi-backed media outlets of inciting further unrest and demanded that the kingdom rein in their coverage. "Otherwise who will pay the price," he warned.

The protests in Iran today arguably pose an even greater threat to the regime than those in 2022 – yet the reaction in the Arab world has been surprisingly muted. Even news broadcasts in January have been led, routinely, by stories other than Iran. Many officials sound nervous when they comment, if

they say anything at all. Two things account for the change in tone: Iran's diminished status, and the Gulf's growing fear of chaos.

The Israeli wars that followed the massacre of Oct 7, 2023, have wrecked Iran's network of proxies. Hezbollah, its once-powerful ally in Lebanon, has been badly weakened and still faces near-daily Israeli air strikes. Long-time ruler Bashar al-Assad's pro-Iranian regime in Syria is in October 2024, at the height of Israel's war with Hezbollah, many Lebanese saw his visit as an infuriating show of support for the militia during a war they opposed. Yet his most recent trip, on Jan 8, prompted more amusement than annoyance.

All of this makes the fate of the Islamic republic seem less urgent. Syrians might feel a sense of schadenfreude at its woes, but they no longer live in fear of its militias. When Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi flew to Beirut in October 2024, at the height of Israel's war with Hezbollah, many Lebanese saw his visit as an infuriating show of support for the militia during a war they opposed. Yet his most recent trip, on Jan 8, prompted more amusement than annoyance.

US President Donald Trump has threatened to act if the regime

At a time when Iranians were in the streets protesting about his government's failed economic policies, a seemingly tone-deaf Mr Araghchi brought along an economic delegation to discuss their meagre trade ties. He also made time to sign copies of his new book, *The Power Of Negotiation* – an ironic title, since his failed effort at negotiating with America in 2025 ended with a squadron of B-2 bombers blowing up the uranium-enrichment facility at Fordow.

In a recent interview with *The Economist*, Mr Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, described Iran as having been "relegated to a second-rate power", an assessment that many Arab officials have come to share. The biggest stories in the Arab world over the past two weeks have been the falling out between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and clashes between the central government and a Kurdish militia in northern Syria.

Still, if Iran is no longer a regional colossus, it is not totally impotent either. That is another reason for the restrained reaction in Arab Gulf states. For the second time in seven months, officials there are watching nervously to see if America will attack Iran.

US President Donald Trump has threatened to act if the regime

killed protesters; it has already murdered hundreds. The American President is expected to meet advisers and discuss his options, which range from military strikes to cyberattacks and tighter economic sanctions. Mr Trump has urged Iranians to keep protesting and "take over" institutions, promising that "help is on its way".

Though Israel damaged Iran's arsenal of long-range ballistic missiles during the June war, the regime still has thousands of short-range projectiles capable of hitting targets across the Gulf. After America bombed Iran's nuclear facilities, the regime fired a salvo of them at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, which hosts the regional headquarters of America's central command. The strike was largely symbolic. Iran warned America and Qatar in advance, and all but one of its missiles were intercepted.

Iranian officials have cautioned their Gulf counterparts that they will widen their targets if attacked again – perhaps to include Bahrain, home to America's Fifth Fleet. Such threats may be just bluster. An Iranian attack that caused real damage in the Gulf would probably trigger an enormous American response.

Then again, if the Islamic republic felt existential peril from a mix of domestic protests and foreign attacks, it might take the

gamble. In any event, Gulf rulers have no desire to call a bluff.

They also worry about what comes next. They have spent most of this century dealing with the consequences of state collapse in Iraq, after the American-led invasion, and then in Syria, during a long civil war. Unrest in those countries sent everything from jihadists to amphetamines flowing into Jordan and the Gulf. The Saudis also have a civil war in neighbouring Yemen to worry about, and another across the Red Sea in Sudan.

The last thing they want is state collapse in Iran, a country of 92 million people just 200km across the water. Refugees are one concern. Weapons are another: A fragmented Iran might lose control over its arsenal of missiles and drones, to the benefit of the thousands of kilograms of uranium still unaccounted for after the war.

There is no love lost between Arab regimes and the Islamic republic. The former would welcome a new Iranian government that was willing to curtail its nuclear programme and its support for Arab militias.

After two years of regional war, however, many Middle Eastern governments now fear that unrest in Iran will lead to more chaos rather than less. © 2026 THE ECONOMIST NEWSPAPER LIMITED. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

We are in the early stages of a global US de-risking exercise

No sane customer would pay more for a product they are not sure will be delivered.

Edward Luce

The world until recently believed that US-China decoupling was on

the way. It turns out that most countries are now scrambling to de-risk from America.

As US Federal Reserve chairman Jerome Powell, or Denmark, one of America's most

loyal allies, can attest, pacifying US President Donald Trump gets you only so far. It buys time, but is no substitute for having protection against a rogue superpower. We are thus in the early stages of an accelerating process of US de-risking.

Social distancing from the world's hegemon is a painful

business, especially if you are an ally. Yet America's friends are those most urgently in need of it. Their place in the sun rested on the world America made. The jolt to European and Asian allies is thus correspondingly greater.

But America's repudiation of the "liberal international order" is also a shock – although in

many ways a pleasant one – to China, its chief adversary. China is now auditioning to be the main provider of global public goods, including stability.

As world leaders converge in Davos, most of the chatter is about coping with Mr Trump, who is bringing half his Cabinet. A quieter China will be there to

pick up the pieces. In that respect, today is zero-sum.

A loss to America is a gain for China. Countries in America's hemisphere, including Canada, are moving closer to Beijing.

Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney is stopping in China before heading to Davos. As goes Britain's debate about putting Brexit behind it and moving closer to the European Union also comes partly courtesy of Mr Trump.

He is spurring all kinds of third-party conversations that were not happening a year ago. Europe wants partnership with the Trans-Pacific group. That China is not a member but wants to join, while the US pulled out in

global diplomacy.

Countries are de-risking in two main areas. The first is economic. Mr Carney is again out front. Almost three-quarters of Canada's exports go to the US, a number Canada aims to reduce to below 50 per cent. A lot will divert to China and India.

Europe's conclusion last week of a free trade deal with Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay) and Britain's deal in 2025 with India are Mr Trump's co-creations. Britain's debate about putting Brexit behind it and moving closer to the European Union also comes partly courtesy of Mr Trump.

He is spurring all kinds of third-party conversations that were not happening a year ago. Europe wants partnership with the Trans-Pacific group. That China is not a member but wants to join, while the US pulled out in

Mr Trump's first term, says it all.

It is far harder to diversify from the US dollar. But Mr Trump's now open assault on Fed independence – including launching a criminal probe into its chairman – is pushing that too. Regardless of whether Mr Powell stands trial (and, less likely still, is convicted), investors can expect an era of rising US inflation and a falling dollar. Whichever "Kevin" replaces Mr Powell (either Mr Hassert or Mr Walsh) will be Mr Trump's patsy. America's era of easy money will probably outlive the artificial intelligence boom.

The price of gold – history's best hedge against war and pestilence – has risen by more than 70 per cent since Mr Trump took office in 2025. Gold is also taking up a growing share of global central bank reserves at the expense of the dollar. So far, none of America's



President Donald Trump and other US leaders at a meeting with oil executives at the White House in Washington on Jan 9. Social distancing from the world's hegemon is a painful business, especially if you are an ally, says the writer. Yet America's friends are those most urgently in need of it. PHOTO: REUTERS

investors has threatened a buying strike on US Treasury bonds. Mr Trump appears to overlook that the markets are at least as important as the Fed in setting borrowing costs. Big foreign withdrawals could quickly wipe out the easy money gains of short-term interest rate cuts.

Dumping Treasuries is the financial version of the nuclear option. The actual nuclear option also looms in geostrategic hedging. It has not escaped the notice of America's adversaries that Mr Trump speaks nicely about nuclear North Korea. Were Venezuela a nuclear state, Nicolas Maduro would not now be sitting in a Brooklyn jail.

South Korea, Germany, Australia, Poland and even Canada are all debating to one degree or another whether to go nuclear. Were Mr Trump to annex Greenland, Canada would weigh it seriously. The disabling

of NATO would trigger a broader rest-of-the-West hunt for new security. Denmark now sees the upside of some kind of European nuclear umbrella.

There is no historical precedent of a dominant power quickly wiping out its ally's leadership, or opposed to being defeated in war or by natural decline. Complying with a revisionist titan's increasingly random demands imposes an opportunity cost on building alternative systems. America's allies are now at that hinge point between the past and the future. Mr Trump is making their choice easier.

Raising the price of US protection is one thing – and a reasonable one. But no sane customer would pay more for a product they are not sure will be delivered. Contrary to the mafia analogies, Mr Trump is offering America's partners a deal they cannot accept. FINANCIAL TIMES

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