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WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

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Rautahat police
fake arrests
to boost their
performance record

SHIVA PURI
RAUTAHAT, AUG 22

When a team from the Gaur district police office called Om Giri of Chandrapur-5 in a cheque bounce case, he expected to be summoned to court. Instead, officers met him on the roadside on June 1, collected his Rs500 fine, and let him go. The next day, police issued a statement, calling him a fugitive who had been arrested.

"They collect the money from you on the street and then report that they arrested you as a fugitive," Giri said. "That damages a person's reputation."

Giri's case is one of several Kantipur identified in which Rautahat police collected court-ordered fines from people at their homes, shops, or on the road, then publicly reported the transactions as fugitive arrests, even though the individuals were never taken into custody or presented before a judge, as the law requires.

The pattern surfaced on August 11, when the Rautahat Police Office emailed local journalists a list of nine people it said had been arrested and handed over to the court as part of efforts to enforce its verdicts.

Verification by Kantipur found that the list didn't hold up. Ravikant Chaudhary of the Rautahat District Court's enforcement section said police had brought only three of the nine to court that day: Birendra Raut, sentenced to 11 months and 12 days in an arms case, and Khobhari Sah Sonar and Shivamangal Prasad Kushawaha, each sentenced to three years in a vehicular homicide case.

"The other six were not people sentenced to prison. They had only been fined in various cases," Chaudhary said.

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Nepal stalls on UN rapporteur visit amid delays in transitional justice appointments

Nepal is seeking a third term on the UN Human Rights Council while repeatedly stalling UN rapporteur Bernard Duhaime's visit to assess the country's transitional justice process.

BINOD GHIMIRE & DURGA DULAL
KATHMANDU, AUG 22

After years of resistance from successive governments, the then KP Sharma Oli government finally agreed in August 2025 to allow Bernard Duhaime—the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence—to visit Nepal.

But nearly a year later, the long-awaited visit remains uncertain, with the government yet to respond to Duhaime's proposal to visit Nepal in November. The government had initially agreed to a 10-day visit from March 10 to 20, but the dates coincided with Nepal's general elections. The government and Duhaime subsequently agreed to reschedule the visit for June 9 to 19.

However, after the Balendra Shah government in May first week dismissed the office-bearers of the two transitional justice commissions, along with hundreds of other appointees made by previous governments, it informed Duhaime that the June visit would not be possible.

In its May 18 letter, the government said it would "highly welcome" a rescheduled visit after September. Duhaime responded by proposing his visit for November 17 to 27. Three months later, however, he is still waiting for a response from Kathmandu.

"No formal response from the Nepal government has been received so far," Duhaime said in an email response to the Post. His visit is intended to assess



PHOTO: DUHAIME'S X

Bernard Duhaime

Nepal's efforts on truth, justice, reparation, memorialisation and guarantees of non-recurrence in addressing serious human rights violations committed during the 1996–2006 Maoist insurgency.

The Balendra Shah administration cited the vacant leadership of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons when it cancelled Duhaime's June visit. But with the government yet to begin the appointment process for the two transitional justice bodies, it is unclear whether the vacancies can be filled before his proposed visit.

Past appointment processes suggest that filling the vacancies could take around six months, from the call for

applications to the final selection. The government itself has no clear answer on when Duhaime will be allowed to visit Nepal.

"We believe his visit would be effective after the appointments in the commissions," Ramji Danai, chief of the Human Rights Division at the Prime Minister's Office, told the Post. Danai, however, could not provide a specific timeline for the visit.

The latest uncertainty is part of a longer pattern of Nepal delaying access to UN human rights experts. Along with the special rapporteur on truth, justice and reparation, UN experts and working groups on enforced or involuntary disappearances and extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions have repeatedly sought to visit Nepal, with some requests dating back to 2019.

After keeping such requests on hold for years, the government agreed last year to a visit only by Duhaime.

The government's non-committal position in the special rapporteur's visit comes as Nepal seeks a third term on the UN Human Rights Council, with elections scheduled for October. The special rapporteur is a part of the council's special procedures, through which independent experts are mandated to report and advise on human rights issues.

Human rights experts see a paradox in Nepal seeking a third term on the council while remaining non-committal about a visit by one of the council's independent human rights experts.

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Arghakhanchi to issue hunting licences to curb wild boar, deer menace



POST PHOTO: BIRENDRA KC

A farmer shows a maize crop raided by wild boars in Arghakhanchi district.

BIRENDRA KC
ARGHAKHANCHI, AUG 22

The Division Forest Office in Arghakhanchi is all set to issue licences to hunt wild boars, barking deer, and spotted deer. The decision follows a surge in grievances from farmers who suffer heavy crop losses due to the wild animals.

The forest office has invited applications from interested Nepali citizens for hunting licences in a bid to control the menace.

The office decided to issue hunting permissions after farmers across various areas in five local units of Arghakhanchi, a hill district of Lumbini Province, grew frustrated by persistent crop destruction by wild boars, deer and other animals.

On Friday, the forest office issued a public notice asking individuals will-

ing to hunt wild boars, barking deer, and spotted deer using arms permitted by law to apply by August 26.

According to Senior Divisional Forest Officer Narayan Dev Bhattarai, the call aims to minimise damage to major crops. The notice specifies that applicants must submit a copy of their Nepali citizenship certificate, a valid licence for their firearm, and other documents required by law.

The forest office stated that licences will be issued under Rule 9 (1), Schedule 1 of the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Rules, 1973, and Section 11 of the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act, 1973.

"As crop destruction has reached a point where farmers are being displaced from their villages, the goal is to protect food crops and support farmers," said Bhattarai.

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SOME PEAKS DON'T COMPETE FOR
NUMBER ONE, THEY DEFINE IT

Kantipur
ONE

3 Days to Go

कान्तिपुर

OPINION

Nepal wants no Caesar

Democracy will be measured by creating stronger institutions, not by relying on a Caesar to save the country.

SAMAR SJB RANA



In 1937, *The Modern Review* (India) published an article titled *The Rashtrapati* written under the pseudonym Chanakya. It was written against the backdrop of rising strongmen in European states—Hitler in Germany, Stalin in Russia, and Mussolini in Italy. Chanakya is critical of Jawaharlal Nehru, whose popularity was rising among the Indian populace and the cadres of the Indian National Congress. The article was an early warning against the hero-worship of politicians and about how such behaviour from the citizenry, seeking a saviour, could jeopardise democracy. Chanakya recognises this peril and writes, “Therein lies the danger for Jawaharlal and for India.”

A new democracy like Nepal could also succumb to such a threat when personality cults are welcomed with adulation while dissent against deified political leaders is met with severe derision and cyber-bullying. In a democracy, when citizens seek salvation from only one

do not require strong leadership. But more than good leaders, they need strong institutions and branches of government that can maintain checks and balances against any form of executive overreach.

However, the graver threat to democracy emerges from the citizenry’s inability to question their leader, yielding to personality cults. When citizens turn leaders into messiahs, supporters struggle to hold their leaders accountable. The idea of not questioning the incumbent was evident from the RSP’s election campaign—‘*Chup Chap Ghanti Chaap*’ (quietly stamp the bell)—or the prime minister’s social media post that said *dukkha hunus* (rest assured). It is a telling sign when leaders encourage the public not to think critically or speak freely in a democracy, but to mechanically believe that the government is doing good work for the people. Advocating such a practice will be the death of a thoughtful Nepal. Dissent and questioning leaders are fundamental tenets in a democracy.

The single greatest blessing that emerged from the Gen Z movement is not that RSP now commands a majority in the House of Representatives. Instead, it is that the movement inspired the coun-



AI GENERATED

individual, it could undermine the distribution of power among public authorities.

In the aftermath of the Gen Z uprising of September, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) secured a near two-thirds majority in March’s snap polls, instating Balendra ‘Balen’ Shah. The protests voiced a rejection of the older political parties, given their repeated failures to deliver, poor governance, sycophancy, economic stagnation, and corruption. The election slogan, *Ab ki bar Balen sarkar* and the RSP campaign were somewhat fixated on Balen’s popularity and on placing him in the prime minister’s chair.

Despite receiving an overwhelming mandate, the incumbent’s modus operandi has been called into question in terms of parliamentary processes, issuing ordinances, dealing with a constitutional body and at the diplomatic level.

Recently, the prime minister’s advisors summoned the chief and officials from the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) and rebuked them over delays in an investigation, showcasing an overreach while undermining the independence of constitutional bodies. The operating style is further plagued by provocative statements. For instance, during his speech at the RSP general convention, he mentioned, “If required, we will consult with the CIAA not just for five hours but for five years.” The ad hoc behaviours of walking out of the parliament mid-session and reprimanding the head of a constitutional body do not bode well for a young democracy.

In a democracy, leaders matter; but lasting institutions matter more. Benjamin Jones and Benjamin Olken, in their paper, ‘Do Leaders Matter?’ National Leadership and Growth since WWII’, investigate whether leaders have an impact on the growth of the country. The article concludes that institutions play a bigger role than an individual leader in a democracy. It is not that countries like Nepal

try’s youth to embrace their civic duty and actively participate in the democratic process.

The democratic process does not cease after voting. It is a continuous practice of seeking transparency, holding leaders accountable and asking questions from the very first day after a new government assumes power. When someone questions or criticises the Shah administration, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are loyal to the three legacy parties or are against the country’s development.

The pseudonym Chanakya was used by none other than Jawaharlal Nehru, who had been the president of the Indian National Congress for two consecutive terms. Nehru’s self-deprecating article warns the citizens and writes, “What if the fancy turns? Men like Jawaharlal, with all their capacity for great and good work, are unsafe in democracy. He calls himself a democrat and a socialist, and no doubt he does so in all earnestness, but every psychologist knows that the mind is ultimately a slave to the heart and logic can always be made to fit in with the desires and irrepressible urges of a person. A little twist and Jawaharlal might turn a dictator, sweeping aside the paraphernalia of a slow-moving democracy.”

The fallacy of hero-worship is the belief that a single leader will provide Nepal with its elixir for development. Leaders require loyalty from their supporters. However, both leaders and supporters need to draw a line between loyalty and sycophancy. The onus is on the citizens and party loyalists not to surrender themselves to a messiah. Nehru ends the article with, “We want no Caesars.” It is a warning to a democracy not to fall under the spell of a popular leader. Democracy in Nepal will be measured by the creation of stronger institutions, not by relying on a Nepali Caesar to save the country.

Rana holds a Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy (MALD) from the Fletcher School at Tufts University.

JANAK RAJ BHATTA



In 1859, while Jung Bahadur Rana was busy counting the loot his soldiers had usurped from Lucknow after helping the British crush the Sepoy Mutiny, Charles Dickens had published a novel about a revolution that devoured everything around it, including itself. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” it began, describing an aristocracy so deaf to hunger that a nobleman could run over a child with his carriage and pay him a coin. Paris burned for this. A year since Kathmandu was aflame, that line describes us better than anything written since.

One clear anxiety-pumping point is: is our version of urban spring at risk of devouring itself? We are free, wow, hurray, but now we have to make choices, and difficult ones.

Nepal’s deadliest unrest since the fall of the monarchy broke out in the second week of September. A government committee later put the toll at 77 dead and physical losses at Rs84.45 billion, nearly \$586 million. The Parliament was torched to the ground, the Supreme Court was uprooted, and close to 934,000 case files a year in the making were burnt. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli resigned and left under army guard. Sushila Karki, a former chief justice, became Nepal’s first woman prime minister with a widely publicised Discord voting, albeit interim, keeping the country together until an election almost no one believed would take place on time.

It did. On March 5, the Rastriya Swatantra Party, spearheaded by former Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah, created a political tsunami, winning 182 of 275 seats. Three weeks later, at an astrologically chosen minute, Nepal’s youngest prime minister took his oath.

The government looked quite on track; the old elites of political theatre were gone. Poof! Dream come true, right? The Westerners would call it a glorious moment in 10-11,000 generations of Homo Sapiens.

As we scroll through never-ending reels and shorts from the Parliament, this is the part of the story we enjoy

RUPAK S APKOTA



As Nepal and China mark the 71st anniversary of their diplomatic relations, both nations have the opportunity to move beyond ceremonial commemorations and confront the hard realities that have left Kathmandu struggling to transform its geographical proximity to Beijing into tangible economic prosperity. This relationship, which reflects a civilisational grandeur, is increasingly tested by the complex nature of modern geopolitics, implementation failures and institutional frailties. This milestone therefore invites us not just to celebrate but, more importantly, to reflect, to assess, and to envision the future of our bilateral ties.

Civilisational dialogues

The Nepal-China relationship predates the very concept of nation-states. In the 5th century, the Nepali monk Buddhahadra crossed the Himalayas to translate Buddhist scriptures in China. In the 7th century, Princess Bhrikuti carried Nepali civilisation to Tibet, where her influence on Buddhism remains legendary. Later, in the 13th century, the master architect Araniko made a lasting impression on Chinese art and architecture. His designs endure today as symbols of our shared creative heritage.

Far more than diplomatic missions, these were acts of civilisational dialogue, exchanges of knowledge, faith and artistic interactions that bound our peoples across the trans-Himalayan expanse long before the Westphalian system existed. Connected by the enduring legacies of two great philosophers, Gautama Buddha and Confucius, Nepal and China have maintained deep mutual respect for centuries. This is the legacy we have inherited.

The strategic shift

In 2019, Nepal-China relations took a decisive turn when the two countries agreed to elevate their ties to a forward-looking ‘strategic partnership’ under the Belt and Road Initiative, with the shared ambition of transforming Nepal from a landlocked country into a land-linked one. Since then, economic engagements have grown significantly. Yet, economic cooperation remains unbalanced, as

One year of visceral adrenaline rush

A year after the dizziness of freedom, Nepal is still deciding whether it got a revolution or a very expensive tantrum.



POST FILE PHOTO

telling. The harder part is what it did to us in between and what it is doing to us now.

For years, the most honest ambition available to a young Nepali was to leave, run. My own research in labour migration found that people don’t cross borders for wages alone; they leave because home has stopped providing a sense of future, status, mobility and a feeling of being someone. Gen Z-ers briefly reversed that arrow. For a few weeks, ‘*Desh ta banaunu parchha*,’ (we have to build this nation) sounded less like a slogan than a blueprint. That confused, half-formed urge to stay and build rather than queue for a visa might be the one entirely good thing to come out of last year.

The rest gets a little tricky. The movement was very clear about what it hated—corruption, nepotism, censorship; much less about what should take their place. Some wanted the constitution to be enforced. Some wanted an executive directly elected. Some were for the king. Orwell had warned that political language is designed to make lies sound truthful; Nepal’s problem was closer to the opposite, a language honest about its rage and thin on its plan. Camus penned a name for that kind of revolt: the rebel who says no without saying what he is saying yes to. Nepal in September was a magnificent ‘no’, still awaiting its ‘yes’.

The institutional cost was not abstract. Nepal’s National Human Rights Commission, in a report submitted this May, termed the September 9 arson an act of organised crime and named the then prime minister, home minister and information minister as violators. The

Supreme Court is still authenticating recovered files by hand. A movement demanding accountability from institutions ended up needing a fire brigade for the one meant to deliver it. Kafka spent a career describing bureaucracies that quietly devour the people trying to reform them; Nepal spent a September finding what happens when you skip the bureaucracy and go straight to the fire.

Which brings us to the test everyone predicted, and nobody wanted: can the swag survive the over-inflated expectations? So how are known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns looking with almost five months in with a ‘cool’ government?

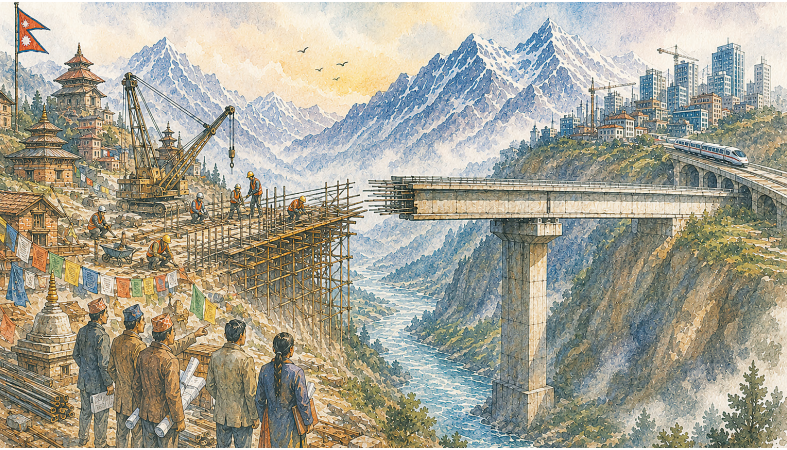
First, the unglamorous cleavage. The government sacked 1,594 political appointees from 110 bodies in a single sweep, only to face its own nepotism complaints when a minister was recalled over his wife’s appointment to a health board. Riverside squatters were cleared with little rehabilitation behind. Fuel shocks and local strain brought gas queues and price hikes to a private sector still nursing unrest-related losses; investment decisions remain frozen, by the government’s own admission.

The PM was immature even by the standards of sympathetic accounts—walking out of Parliament mid-policy address, sending a colleague to field questions he owed the House himself, and keeping foreign envoys at arm’s length for months. Religious intolerance, dormant for years, has resurfaced in the Tarai; a reminder that old fault lines never closed.

Now for the fairer forte. This is still a government elected, not installed; a

Substance over symbolism

Do we see cooperation with China as a long-term strategy or a saviour only in emergencies?



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does our trade deficit. This asymmetry in economic relations is not merely a statistic but a structural vulnerability. It is time to transform this asymmetry into a more balanced proportion.

Modern bilateral security is deeply intertwined with development and connectivity. True security is not merely defensive posturing at the border; it is the security of shared prosperity. Nepal-China relations have already evolved beyond the narrow confines of border stability and traditional security into a comprehensive partnership that emphasises connectivity, infrastructure and trade. The best way to build strong borders is based on mutual well-being, development and trust.

The geopolitical tightrope

Nepal’s position between China and India, two of the world’s fastest-growing economies with different political and economic systems, has long required a mature diplomatic balancing act. This approach demonstrates a remarkable capability for strategic restraint and autonomy. Yet such efforts also face immense headwinds.

In an increasingly polarised world, remaining non-aligned and neutral is difficult. China, India and a renewed US focus on this region. This evolving strategic triad constantly tests our political stability and institutional capacity. Geopolitical rivalry is complicating our connectivity projects, disrupting trade routes and casting a shadow over investment flows. As a result, international economic cooperation is faltering, national development strategies are getting undermined, and political instability is looming.

Our internal problems are far more significant than our external ones. After navigating through numerous

challenges, Nepal’s political landscape has achieved a measure of stability, setting the stage for an era of economic transformation. Nepal was expected to make a quantum leap. Political stability is widely seen as the bedrock for prosperity, but it has also failed to unlock and expand economic opportunities. Instead, corruption, crony capitalism and rent-seeking have often prevailed, weakening the very political stability we achieved. This cycle has created deeper distrust, especially among the youth. When genuine economic avenues are lacking, even a strong political foundation begins to crumble. This raises an unavoidable question: why has Nepal not been able to harness the dynamism of China and India?

China certainly has implementation challenges. But a more critical question is whether Nepal itself has been able to effectively implement the agreements it has signed with China over the past decade. Have we remained stuck in political arrangements and institutional shortcomings that delay or hinder execution? Do we view cooperation with China through a parallel structural lens grounded in long-term strategic thinking, or see Beijing as a saviour only in moments of emergency? Are our perceptions shaped more by emotion than by rational assessment?

Beyond bilateral

The regional picture is equally frustrating. The huge disparity in population, geography and economic size among India, China and Nepal has long made genuine trilateral cooperation elusive. As the smallest partner, Nepal constantly navigates vast disparities in power and capacity. This structural imbalance often limits the scope for balanced three-way initia-

real change from the sluggish, vaguely aristocratic manner of potbellied leaders it replaced. The man at the helm has not had any serious corruption charge stick, and is trying to get the old-style production going. After the walkout, attendance was steadier, and a pledge was made to reply directly to the House. The diplomatic freeze melted into a balanced round of meetings with India, China and the US, treating old partners as equals, rather than choices. The swagger that the old guard sneered at is still a genuine relief for many young Nepalis, proof that power need not look bored with those it serves. That faith howls at every gas line, every question dismissed, but it remains unshaken. Yet, visibly, people want to believe, with never-ending exercise of hope.

The best part this year can take solo credit for is making a younger generation hopeful. We can simply choose to believe that we have passed that Sophistrian illusion to India as well; an exporting nation at last—yay!

There is a contested story about F Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*: that he saw the cover art, a pair of haunting eyes over a fair ground, before the novel was finished and wrote passages to make the book earn the cover it already had. Nepal’s new politics does the trick in reverse. First came the look, then the sneakers, then the memes, then a country that finally got its own joke and now awaits to see whether Balen’s government will deserve that image and not just look like it.

Whether it can be the only question will matter in a year. Dickens closed his novel on a scaffold, with a curious, dogged hope that something better was rising from the ashes of Paris. Nepal doesn’t need a scaffold. It needs its politicians, old and new, to remember that the people who put them there are still betting on hope and a shared future. That’s a good bet. It’s not going to last forever.

And yet, what a year these five months have been! Maybe if Jung Bahadur Rana were literate and alive, he would agree with Dickens, wouldn’t he? Revolutions can truly devour themselves from within. Since we are on a roll, I would call it a ‘frevolution.’ Hope I am right, unlike in old times.

Bhatta is a social behaviour change communication professional and a culture/literature student.

tives and puts pressure on Nepal’s ability to pursue independent economic and strategic choices.

Shifts in the global order might bring China and India closer. But the reality on the ground remains more complex. Persistent geopolitical tensions and big strategic differences continue to create a difficult, sometimes adversarial environment for their shared neighbourhood. Frameworks like the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor and various trilateral dialogues remain largely aspirational. They generate headlines but rarely produce tangible outcomes. While economic logic is recognised, it simply fails to translate into sustained cooperation.

What comes next?

Looking ahead, the trajectory of Nepal-China relations will be shaped by the broader strategic competition between China and the United States, as well as by India’s enduring influence in the region. Nepal’s foreign policy has always been guided by national interest, not ideology or any particular value system. Our strategic calculus is based on avoiding any alignment, including multi-alignment. Instead, we need to practice a multi-engagement approach to maximise benefits, while maintaining our non-aligned credentials.

After years of constructive dialogue and careful consideration, we have a clear national consensus: to actively promote and deepen our economic cooperation within the framework of building the high-quality Belt and Road. In this context, economic and infrastructure diplomacy will continue to be central to our bilateral ties. However, we need new horizons too. Technological advancement and artificial intelligence are emerging areas where Nepal can access affordable new technologies and new products from China to enhance its development capacity and help address the difficulties holding back our progress.

We have history. We have geography. What we lack is the institutional discipline and strategic clarity to turn proximity into prosperity. Unless we address our domestic shortcomings first, neither our deep historical ties nor modern partnership will secure the future that we deserve. The Himalayas have connected us for centuries. It is time to build bridges worthy of the landscape itself.

Sapkota served as foreign affairs advisor to the Prime Minister of Nepal from October 2023 to July 2024.

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— Editors

SMART STAYS

Budget-friendly places for Nepali students in Nagoya

These five areas offer students different ways to balance affordable rent, convenient commutes and everyday amenities.



Fukiage
Fukiage sits in Chikusa Ward. It is a residential pocket—mostly apartment blocks and small local shops—that trades the buzz of downtown for quieter streets, while still keeping the city centre close enough for a daily commute.

Pros
The subway ride into Sakae takes about 10 minutes, and cycling takes around 15 minutes. Rents here are noticeably cheaper than in areas closer to Sakae, making it one of the better-value options for students who still want quick access to the city.

Cons
There is not much beyond convenience stores and a few local diners. Students wanting nightlife or a café scene will need to travel into Sakae or Imaike, adding transport costs on top of the savings on rent.

Imaike
Imaie sits at the junction of the Higashiyama and Sakura-dori subway lines. The streets around the station are packed with ramen shops and small local eateries. It functions as a mini downtown of its own, long favored by young Japanese residents.

Pros
Plenty of affordable restaurants and shops make eating out affordable day-to-day, helping offset the cost of rent in the area.

Cons
Because it's popular with both students and young professionals, competition for units pushes rents up.



Motoyama
Motoyama is the closest station to Nagoya University's Higashiyama Campus and Aichi Gakuin University's Kusumoto Campus. The area carries an atmosphere shaped by research and academics.

Pros
Locals consider it an underrated pick for affordability—two subway lines, reasonable rent, and a supermarket within easy reach.

Cons
Because the area caters mainly to students and researchers, it lacks the boutique shops and retail variety, leaving fewer options for browsing or casual shopping close to home.



Otobashi
Otobashi sits a bit apart from the city's main transit grid. It is a neighborhood where daily life runs on practicality rather than student culture.

Pros
Rent here runs low, making it one of the most affordable options on this list for students prioritising budget.

Cons
The savings come with a longer commute, meaning extra time and possibly extra transport costs to reach campus or the city centre regularly.

Mizuho Ward
Mizuho is home to a mix of older Japanese-style homes alongside larger houses. Reached via Mizuho Kuyakusho Station, it offers a direct ride into central Nagoya without a transfer.

Pros
Housing here is more affordable than in the central and eastern wards, and it offers a residential environment with access to schools and transit.

Cons
The area's older housing stock means some apartments lack modern conveniences such as updated insulation or newer appliances.



PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK

Based on conversations with local Nepali students in Nagoya.

‘Aliens’ at 40: from wearable cameras to exoskeletons, here are the technologies the film predicted

By 2179, synthetics appear to be approaching human levels of cognitive function.

STEVE BENFORD

Director James Cameron's acclaimed sci-fi movie *Aliens* turns 40 in August. It's a sequel to Ridley Scott's claustrophobic breakout hit *Alien*, made in 1979. Where the original featured one terrifying creature, Cameron's movie features hundreds – and pits them against a squad of space marines.

A host of intriguing technologies make an appearance, including interstellar travel, hypersleep (where humans are preserved in stasis for long space journeys) and terraforming (making other worlds liveable for humans).

Some of the technologies in the film have already come to pass – or look likely to soon. But others were missed and some remain firmly in the realms of science fiction.

In *Aliens*, the marines travel to a distant moon to investigate the disappearance of over 100 human settlers. Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver), the main protagonist of the first film, goes along to advise.

On arrival, they run into a six-year-old girl, called Newt, who managed to escape the grisly fate of the other colonists. When

the marines encounter the alien hive, chaos and carnage ensue.

The technology featured in *Aliens* appears to be there to support the wonderful storytelling, rather than predict the path of innovation, as a futurologist might.

But let's take a look at it. The film is set in 2179, 153 years into our future. Journeying 153 years into the past would land us in 1893, when common technologies were horse drawn and steam streetcars and gas lighting. Typewriters with Qwerty keyboards went on sale the following year.

Industrial aesthetic
We've moved on considerably, but the future world of *Aliens* feels less distant in many respects. Company executives use clunky business cards to trigger low-resolution video calls and wave computer printouts during meeting room showdowns.

For modern audiences, however, the lack of personal electronic devices may be jarring. One can only assume that they must have fallen out of favour by 2179.

The gritty, industrial visual style established in the first film was taken further

here. *Aliens* introduces a variety of military vehicles that contain futuristic elements while drawing on real hardware used in the Vietnam war. The movie's look influenced later films, but it has also been described as “everyday” and “ugly”.

An exception is the tracking technology: the motion detectors, wearable cameras and biosensors embedded into wristbands. These feel broadly “current”. But if we extrapolate from the present day, one might expect engineers in 2179 to make greater use of surveillance cameras and computer vision (a sub-field of AI where machines are trained to “understand” images and video).

A network of “smart cameras” throughout the moon colony could have tracked both the aliens and humans. Similar networks today monitor crowds and individuals – and watch for suspicious behaviour – on city streets and public transport.

Sentry guns and exoskeletons
The robots of *Aliens* are striking. Some are not so far removed from hardware used today, but with notable differences. In two separate scenes, Ripley straps into a massive mechanical suit known as a “loader”.

They are mainly used to move cargo, but, conveniently, can be appropriated for fighting xenomorphs. The loaders are a type of exoskeleton, real life wearable tech that may enhance human strength or movement.

Exoskeletons aren't generally used for this kind of task yet. Large autonomous or teleoperated factory robots are the go-to technology for lifting heavy hardware. This is safer than having humans operate in such hazardous environments.

Current exoskeletons are smaller in scale than the loaders. They are helping people walk again after traumatic injury and commercial versions are available to support those with mobility issues to hill walk.

The war in Ukraine, meanwhile, has familiarised us with autonomous combat robots. One or two share a striking resemblance to the film's automated sentry guns, which guard an entrance passage in the colony. But drone aircraft, in heavy use today, are notable by their absence.

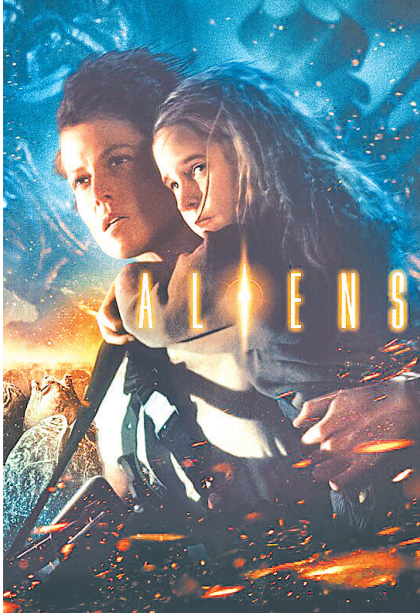
However, one robot in *Aliens* operates at a level far beyond the rest: the android Bishop, played by Lance Henriksen. Bishop looks like a human on the outside and is referred to in the film as a “synthetic”.

By 2179, synthetics appear to be approaching human levels of cognitive function – something known as artificial general intelligence (AGI). They even seem to observe the laws of robotics devised by scientist and author Isaac Asimov. In one scene, Bishop tells crew members that he cannot harm a human or allow one to be harmed – Asimov's first law.

Synthetics occupy capable and realistic bodies which seem to incorporate soft robotics. In this real research area, scientists create robots with flexible materials instead of hard ones, such as metal. Fluids or pressurised air generate movement rather than conventional electric actuators.

The synthetics probably have soft robotic systems overlaid on a rigid framework, similar to flesh on bone. They are therefore likely to be a mixture of soft and conventional robotics.

Tech conundrum
Some of the tech in *Aliens* remains well out of reach. We don't have propulsion systems capable of sending crews to other stars and back within a lifetime. As regards hypersleep, in rare cases, humans have survived extreme hypothermia for over an hour, but this is not recommended. Terraforming, meanwhile,



Aliens
Director: James Cameron
Runtime: 2h 17min
Release Date: July 18, 1986

remains resolutely theoretical. But what of the synthetics?

Rightly or wrongly, many researchers and companies aspire to create humanoid robots and achieve AGI. We are bombarded with visions of their latest efforts on social media. But some proportion of those working on such ventures are looking to raise money. Many experts would argue that synthetic humans like those in the *Alien* movies are still far beyond today's capabilities.

This leads us to a striking conundrum at the heart of *Aliens*. Why aren't there more synthetics? Why not send a population of them to terraform worlds or fight aggressive ETs?

Perhaps humans are more expendable: maybe we will end up doing AI's dirty work because we are the cheaper commodity. But there is a more optimistic answer. Maybe, despite all of our apparent failings and weaknesses, humans are the more capable being.

After all, it is Ripley – not Bishop – who, wildly improvising with available technologies and driven by her unstoppable desire to protect Newt, defeats the alien queen. Perhaps there is hope yet for our species.

– The Conversation



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