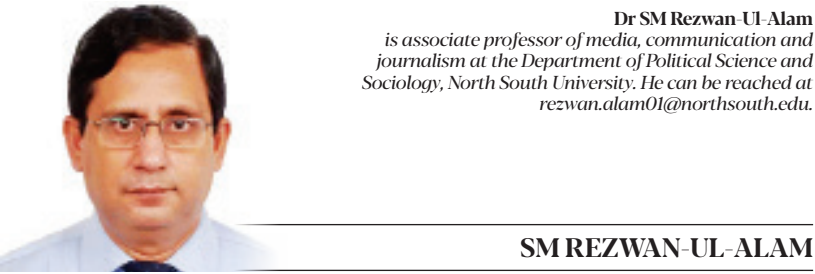


As deepfakes blur reality, voters must learn to doubt what they see



SM REZWAN-UL-ALAM

The most significant threat to democracy today no longer comes from ballot-box manipulation or overt displays of brute force. It enters quietly, almost invisibly, through the screen of a smartphone—an AI-generated video so realistic that it can upend voter perceptions within seconds. The signs are already there as Bangladesh’s upcoming parliamentary election risks becoming a warning sign for others, demonstrating how generative artificial intelligence, particularly deepfake technology, can be weaponised to distort public opinion, undermine political opponents, and create widespread confusion at a pace that overwhelms traditional safeguards.

During the last election cycle, the country witnessed a relatively small but calculated deployment of deepfakes. Videos surfaced showing opposition leaders “saying” things they had never said, their faces manipulated to deliver extreme positions designed to erode public trust. AI-generated news anchors appeared to broadcast fabricated propaganda. Perhaps most dangerously, on the eve of the polls, sudden false announcements circulated claiming that specific candidates had withdrawn from the race. These were not accidental errors or harmless rumours; they were deliberate, coordinated attacks intended to make voters doubt what they see and hear. These threats have since multiplied. In the new reality, the old phrase “seeing is believing” no longer holds. It must now evolve into “seeing is suspecting.”

In the absence of reliable large-scale detection technology, the responsibility for identifying deepfakes now falls heavily on individual citizens. The speed and volume of social media circulation have rendered automated systems insufficient. Every voter must

therefore rely on a combination of intuition, careful observation, and basic digital forensic awareness. Deepfakes often reveal themselves through tiny imperfections of human expression, details that advanced algorithms still struggle to replicate. But by closely observing how light reflects on a face, how shadows form, or whether skin tones across the face, neck, and hands align naturally, viewers can detect subtle anomalies.

Another significant giveaway lies in the mismatch between lip movements and voice. In several manipulated videos, it has been observed that mouth movements failed to fully align with the spoken words. At times, the speech rhythm felt unnaturally smooth, lacking the pauses, breaths, and imperfect cadences characteristic of human speech. These are clear indicators of an artificially generated voice track layered over a synthetic video.

Deepfake detection, however, is not limited to technical cues alone; contextual behaviour provides equally powerful signals. If a video portrays a political leader delivering a message that sharply contradicts their known stance, history, or temperament, it should immediately raise suspicion. Deepfakes are deliberately crafted to provoke emotional responses, such as shock, anger, and outrage. The moment a viewer experiences an instant emotional surge is precisely when scepticism becomes most necessary. Such content is often accompanied by urgent prompts such as “share this immediately!”—a tactic designed to bypass judgment and accelerate the spread of falsehoods.

Bangladesh has not been totally blind to this emerging threat. The Election Commission (EC) has publicly acknowledged that artificial intelligence may pose a greater danger than traditional forms of electoral violence. In response, the EC has

proposed establishing a centralised cell dedicated to combating AI-generated disinformation. This unit is intended to work in coordination with the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), the ICT Division, and national cybersecurity agencies to enable the rapid removal of harmful content. The EC has also recommended amendments to the Representation of the People Order (RPO) to formally regulate the misuse of AI and social media during elections.

These domestic initiatives have been reinforced through

Bangladesh’s electoral information environment. Collectively, these efforts signal that both state and international stakeholders recognise the seriousness of the digital threat and are committed to resisting it.

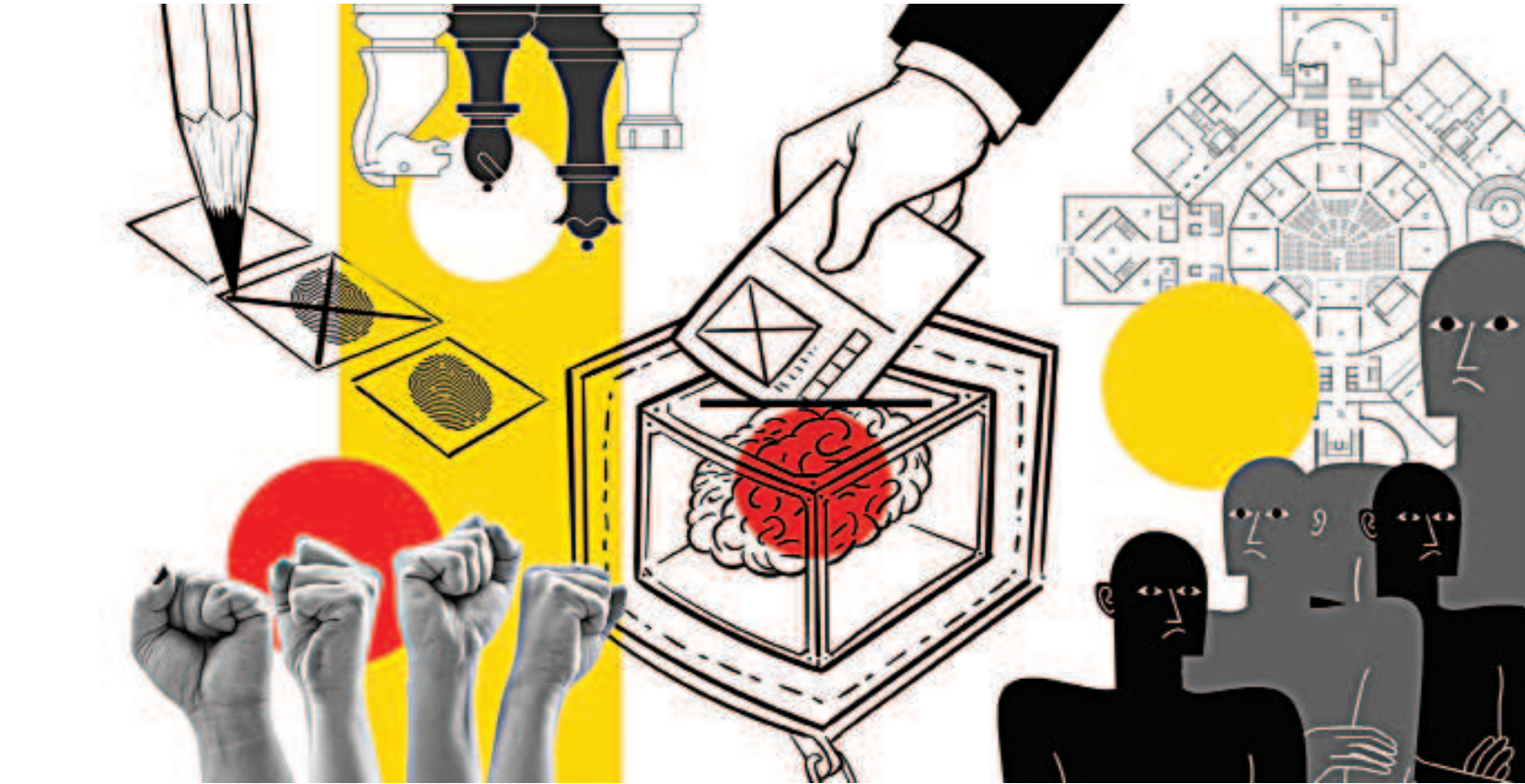
Yet, significant structural challenges persist. Most deepfake detection tools available globally are trained on English-language datasets, creating a substantial gap when verifying Bangla-language audio and video. As a result, viral Bangla deepfakes cannot be quickly or reliably authenticated through automated systems. Independent

official statements and independent fact checks through partisan lenses, weakening counter disinformation efforts. Digital literacy also remains uneven, particularly in rural and low-connectivity areas, where citizens are less equipped to identify subtle signs of manipulation.

To bridge these gaps, a coordinated, citizen-centric strategy is essential. When voters encounter suspicious content, they must take immediate and structured action. The first step is to report the material directly on the relevant platform—Facebook, YouTube, or TikTok—

Police Cyber Crime Unit, when the content clearly violates electoral regulations or incites harm.

The struggle to protect Bangladesh’s democratic process now extends far beyond physical polling booths. It is unfolding within the quiet, personal space of each citizen’s mobile screen. Deepfakes are not merely pieces of misinformation; they are psychological weapons engineered to confuse, provoke, and destabilise. Our democratic resilience, therefore, relies on a combination of state-led frameworks, international cooperation, and most critically, the



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

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international collaboration. Under the leadership of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the BALLOT Project—implemented in partnership with UN Women and Unesco—has taken shape. Unlike routine monitoring initiatives, this project prioritises building local capacity, strengthening civic awareness, and integrating global best practices to protect

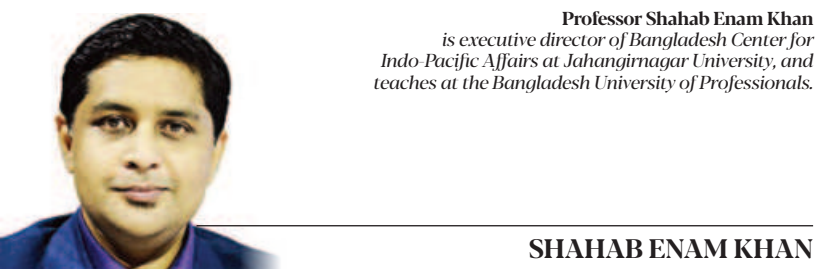
fact-checking organisations, such as Rumor Scanner and Dismislab, continue to face chronic shortages of funding, skilled personnel, and AI forensic capacity, limiting their ability to respond effectively to high volumes of misinformation. This challenge is compounded by a growing trust deficit in the media ecosystem in general, with many citizens now interpreting both

using built-in options such as “False Information” or “Impersonation,” enabling moderation systems to respond promptly. The second step is to submit the content to independent fact-checkers for verification, ensuring that an authoritative and non-partisan assessment enters the public domain. The third step is to notify relevant authorities, such as local EC offices or the Bangladesh

vigilance of ordinary voters.

To safeguard electoral legitimacy, voters must transform their screens into tools of verification rather than channels of manipulation. Democracy in the digital era will survive not through blind trust, but through informed suspicion and responsible civic engagement. Only then can democratic choice rest on truth rather than deception.

Washington just rewrote the geopolitical rules. Is Bangladesh ready?



SHAHAB ENAM KHAN

In November 2025, Washington did something extraordinary, silently codifying the end of the world order that had shaped global politics since the end of the Cold War. The Trump administration’s National Security Strategy (NSS) is not just another policy document; it is a demolition notice—and Bangladesh is standing in the rubble wondering where the exit sign went. It also marks the beginning of a phase of geoeconomic warfare that will hit export-dependent democracies the hardest.

For 30 years, we navigated international politics under the convenient assumption that America’s self-interest broadly aligned with promoting democracy, open trade, and rules-based institutions. We could hedge between powers, court Chinese investment while exporting to Western markets, and assume Washington would maintain the basic architecture of globalisation. As Henry Kissinger famously observed, “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac,” and we have been happily hedging between suitors. That world is over, and so is our pendulum swing between suitors.

The Biden administration’s 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) promised a region that was “free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient.” It explicitly tied US engagement to democracy, human rights, and international norms.

This is basically the language we had learned to speak—and manipulate—for three decades. But the NSS opens by calling that entire project a catastrophic mistake. It accuses post-Cold War elites of betting on globalism and “so-called free trade” that apparently gutted America’s factories and allowed US interests to be manipulated by international institutions. This is not campaign rhetoric; it is now official doctrine.

The document also defines American strategy in starkly simple terms: protecting core national interests, period. Foreign policy will be judged by what it delivers to American workers and factories, not by how many democracies Washington “supports” or how many international norms it upholds. Democracy promotion, deradicalisation, humanitarian intervention, and the progressive power of international law are all quietly sidelined, at least for now.

The IPS relied on multilateral frameworks as force multipliers. The NSS, by contrast, describes many of these bodies as infected by “transnationalism” and “anti-Americanism”. Every relationship is assessed through a cost-benefit lens: who pays for defence? Who maintains trade surpluses with America? The slogans of “fairness”, “no free-riding”, and “pro-American worker” appear throughout like a tax accountant’s

fever dream.

Even on China—where Biden and Trump agree on the threat—the approaches diverge significantly. The Trump administration’s strategy is openly mercantilist, featuring tariffs, industrial policy, and geo-economic tools for technology, energy, rare earths, and supply chains.

I wrote in an AMCHAM Bangladesh journal in 2021 that the line between geopolitics and geo-economics was rapidly blurring, with economics becoming a primary tool of strategic

unfettered globalisation”, and signals that tariffs and investment screening will be the primary strategic tools. Interdependence is something to be weaponised or unwound, not a pacifying force. For export-dependent economies like ours, this means interdependence is no longer a guarantee of mutual benefit. So, we’d better get our acts right!

The strategy even embraces what it calls “flexible realism”, affirming that there is nothing hypocritical about maintaining close ties with non-

the private sector, the tariff threat remains real. We export billions of dollars’ worth of garments to America, built on waler-thin margins and competitive access. Our export model is acutely vulnerable.

For the government, the China dilemma intensifies. Our infrastructure bears deep Chinese footprints in ports, power plants, and telecom networks, while our export engine runs on Western markets. Washington is likely to press for reduced reliance on Chinese technologies. This we cannot afford to comply, but we cannot afford not to comply either. It is the geopolitical equivalent of choosing between your lungs and heart.

As for non-governmental priorities, climate, refugees, and democracy risk becoming blind spots. For one of the world’s most climate-vulnerable states, the NSS’s rejection of “Net Zero” ideologies is deeply troubling. If US climate finance dries up, we face greater adaptation pressure with fewer resources. And reduced scrutiny over democracy could mean unchecked political realities, whether it be in the form of extremist populism or more refugees waiting at the borders of states.

Clearly, the comfortable era of “friend to all, enemy to none” is ending. We are entering what I described at a recent event in Phnom Penh as “Engage All, Alliance with Balance”. A world of geo-economic blocs will be unforgiving. Bangladesh must therefore move from reactive hedging to deliberate strategic statecraft. Yes, that means making difficult decisions. The way I see it, it requires three fundamental shifts.

First, treat economic policy as security policy. Trade agreements, supply chains, digital standards, and port operations are now security

concerns. We need a coherent vision for Bangladesh’s place in emerging supply chains.

Second, engage major powers without becoming their subordinate. Build coalitions with other middle powers to keep rational options open. Professionalise strategic communication with Beijing, Islamabad, Delhi, and Washington to establish clear red lines on sovereignty and strategic autonomy, and think creatively about new regionalism beyond mere geographical proximity. The NSS, after all, allows Washington to court both Delhi and Islamabad simultaneously: Delhi to share the security “burden” in the Indo-Pacific, and Islamabad for its access to Middle and Central Asia.

Third, upgrade strategic thinking at home. Our 20th-century debates about non-alignment, aid dependency, and reliance on a narrow export basket are no longer sufficient. We need a genuine political and social consensus that places economic transformation and technological upgrading at the centre of foreign and economic policy.

The 2025 NSS delivers a Machiavellian truth: states will increasingly abandon the idea that values, norms, and interests can comfortably coexist. Liberal internationalism is giving way to transactional multipolarity, and weaker states will have to navigate without the shelter of protective norms. For Bangladesh, 2026 will determine whether it adapts or suffers the consequences of pretending otherwise. The old rulebook offered shelter in international law and multilateral institutions. The new one offers specific, conditional, and revocable deals. Bangladesh must learn to negotiate them.

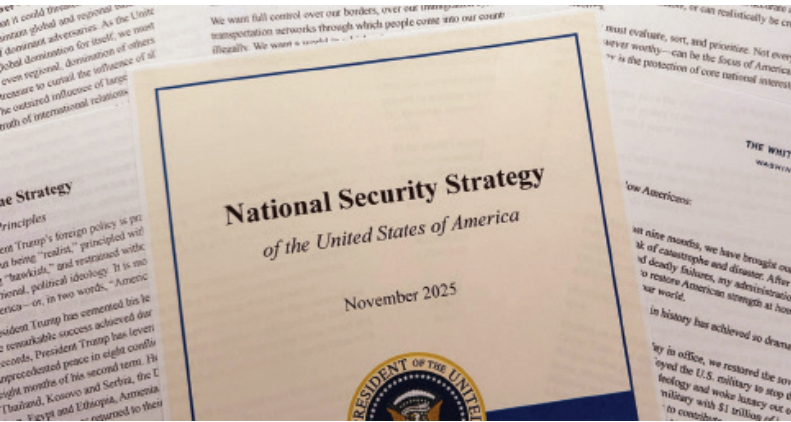


PHOTO: COLLECTED

The National Security Strategy of the USA released in November 2025.

defence. That future has now arrived, and frankly, it has come on schedule. The NSS affirms America’s economy, industrial base, and technological edge as the core of its national power, asserting that economic security is inseparable from national security. The US has the right to defend that principle, and Alexander Hamilton’s warning about dependency, as cited in the NSS, captures a truth every state should heed.

The NSS calls for “balanced trade”, rejects what it terms “faith in

democracies if they serve American interests. That candour is refreshing. But it also means that Washington will work with anyone who advances its industrial goals, regardless of their democratic credentials.

For Bangladesh, 2026 will be a complicated concoction of post-LDC graduation, the global rise of protectionism, and intensifying US-China economic rivalry. It is like graduating from school only to discover your degree is worthless—and the economy has collapsed. For