The Other Side of Diplomacy

Megasthenes ponders the intricacies of statesmanship

FOREIGN policy and diplomacy are terms that are cognate in concept, but not quite synonymous or interchangeable. Lord Gore Booth, who headed the British diplomatic service during 1965-69, explained the difference very lucidly: "Foreign policy is what you do; diplomacy is how you do it."

Walter Lippmann once wrote that in foreign relations, as in all other relations, a policy "has been formed only when commitment and power have been brought into balance."

The two essential ingredients for an effective foreign policy, or for that matter any policy, are thus commitment and capability, and these have to be in tandem. In the 1960s the US had a well-defined Vietnam policy. There was commitment to the policy and also the capability to pursue it. When the policy seemed to be leading nowhere, commitment began to wane, although capability still existed. All too soon the policy became untenable.

When the USSR intervened in Afghanistan in 1979, it was surely in pursuit of a policy. The policy collapsed nearly a decade on, when both commitment and capability flagged. Developing countries are generally more susceptible to pressures that bear upon sensitive foreign policy issues.

The UN Charter is emphatic that all member states are sovereign equals. It does not follow though that they are also political and economic equals, or militarily

