equal. Conventional wisdom suggests that in international relations, a country should seek a role that is commensurate with its power. A small country, which cannot shape or significantly influence events external to it, has obvious constraints in the sphere of foreign policy. Often enough, such a country may only stoop to conquer. In the area of diplomacy, however, countries enjoy greater latitude. Third world diplomacy, though, lacks the "tinsel and titillation" associated with diplomacy of major powers, a recent example of which would be the music diplomacy -- featuring the New York Philharmonic -- in North Korea.

Diplomacy of old was said to be a world of "nuance and scruple, influence and interpretation." Today, diplomacy is all that and more. It has lost much of its glamour, is more complex and, at times, even technical. Subtlety and skill in conveying a message or sentiment has always been integral to diplomacy. Between late 1958 and early 1960, Prime Ministers Nehru and Chou En-lai exchanged a series of letters which in effect constituted a "connecting thread for the whole diplomatic debate" on the Sino-Indian border issue. The exchange did not resolve the matter, but did culminate in a meeting of the two leaders in New Delhi in 1960. Nehru's early letters used the salutation "My dear Prime Minister." This changed gradually to "Dear Prime Minister," which was construed as a less cordial, even coldly, formal salutation. Perhaps it signaled disappointment that the exchange of letters did not quite narrow the gap separating the two sides. In his invitation letter to Chou in 1960, Nehru was, of course, warm, and returned to the address "My dear Prime Minister."

It is even possible for diplomatic signals to be too subtle. By 1970, the US and China had begun to view each other in the geo-political rather than the ideological context. Both countries moved charily to explore options that could lead to a fruitful bilateral relationship. It would be an epochal development in international relations. On China's national day in 1970, American writer, Edgar Snow, an old friend of China, and his wife were placed next to Mao Tse-tung on Tien An Men. Photographs showed Mao reviewing the anniversary parade with Snow at his side; the first time that an American had been so honoured. Only later did Henry Kissinger grasp the purport of this diplomatic signal: Sino-US relations had the personal attention of Mao. It was a signal, Kissinger would observe dryly, that was simply too oblique and subtle for "crude Occidental minds."

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Diplomacy is, in the main, executed by resident diplomats, and also increasingly in modern times by visiting dignitaries and peripatetic special envoys. A special envoy is entrusted with a specific mission, and is received by the host government at a level deemed appropriate, which could vary from head of government to senior officials.

In February 2008, the information minister of Senegal, Dr. Bacar Dia, visited Bangladesh as special envoy of the president of Senegal. He was received by the chief adviser. In March, Ambassador Bahattin Gursoz visited as special envoy of the foreign minister of Turkey. He was received by the foreign affairs adviser.

In September of last year, US deputy assistant secretary of state, John A. Gastright, briefly visited Bangladesh, not as special envoy but in his official capacity. The office of deputy assistant secretary of state is a senior position, comparable to joint secretary in the officialdom of Bangladesh. During his crowded two day visit, Secretary Gastright was received by the chief adviser and the foreign affairs adviser.

This was surely a diplomatic gesture. It was important that Secretary Gastright should receive a first hand account of what the government is seeking to achieve, the institutional reforms it has put in place, and its plans for elections and transition to an elected government. US support can be crucial in so many areas. Where national interests are concerned, one may not stand on ceremony.

On December 22, 1971, Pakistan's new president, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, dispensed with protocol to call on US Ambassador Farland at his residence. This extraordinary gesture, Bhutto explained, was to signal a new period of US-Pakistan relations. Farland's report on this meeting to Secretary of State Rogers was published in a collection of declassified US State papers. In November of 1973, Dr. Kissinger visited Pakistan en route to China; his sixth trip to that country. Bhutto waived protocol and ceremonial to receive him at Islamabad airport, with all honours normally due to a head of state. Diplomacy is a supple instrument of the state.

Last year, Bangladesh sent a highly respected former diplomat as special envoy to the US. He was given ministerial rank for the purpose of the mission. In Washington DC, he had discussions with a very