It was a candid internal memo, somewhat tart in tone. Clearly there are heavy demands on the time of senior members of the administration in Washington. The memo indicated how requests for appointments with them are handled. Only months later, Pakistan would assume the sensitive role of a conduit to facilitate Sino-US rapprochement, and Ambassador Agha Hilaly would have almost unfettered access to Henry Kissinger.

Last year on November 15, the foreign affairs adviser, speaking at the launching ceremony of a think tank on foreign affairs, stressed the need for a shift of focus in Bangladesh's foreign policy apparatus, from defensive to offensive interests. The adviser touched upon the possible role of policy research and advocacy groups in policy formulation. Speaking to the media, he assured that Bangladesh would move aggressively to pursue its strategic goals. Important speeches are usually tailored to the occasion. Brave words, good intentions and high objectives can be stimulating and boost morale.

The adviser's speech and comments were most apposite. Coincidentally, as he spoke, coastal districts of Bangladesh were struck by a hurricane of awesome ferocity. Sidr most certainly was not a diplomatic event, but it made two points that are not unlinked to diplomacy.

Firstly, there was great goodwill and friendship for Bangladesh in many countries, which so generously and spontaneously extended much needed help for relief and reconstruction. And secondly, it cruelly underscored the vulnerabilities of small countries to elements over which they have no control. International relations are intimately related to power equations.

After Sidr, Bangladesh has diligently lobbied the US administration for the grant of temporary protected status to undocumented Bangladeshi migrants in that country. Bangladesh has pleaded that to apprehend and deport any undocumented migrants at this time would add to the heavy burdens of post-Sidr recovery. This is a bold and innovative diplomatic gambit. It is bold because governments of countries that have undocumented migrants abroad are normally reticent on this issue. It is innovative because it seeks to retrieve something from what was an unmitigated humanitarian disaster.

Diplomacy has evolved and adapted over time. In the 19th century, Lord Salisbury saw nothing dramatic in the success of a diplomatist. Rather, his victories consisted of a "series of microscopic advantages, of a judicious suggestion here, of an opportune civility there, of a wise concession at one moment and a farsighted persistence at another, of sleepless tact, immovable calmness and patience that no folly, no provocation, no blunder can shake." Still largely true, even today.

As far as possible without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even to the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Nearly 50 years back, Chester Bowles emphasised the need for "total diplomacy," not simply "wining, dining, reporting, analysing and cautiously predicting." And more than two decades after Bowles, Sir Geoffrey Howe felt that the various elements of diplomacy, namely commercial, political, information and consular should support and strengthen each other for one purpose, to further national interests -- strategic or commercial. These two points are absolutely true.

The trend in modern times is for diplomacy to focus on core areas of national interest. For Bangladesh, these would include access to markets, investments, transfer of technology, more substance in bilateral relations, the maritime boundary, a liberal regime for migrant workers, the environment and climate change. Effective diplomacy, while exploring all options and avenues, can only be constructed and premised on a robust sense of the realities. In other words, gaze on the horizon, and feet planted firmly on the ground.

Adlai Stevenson's Christmas cards to close friends would invariably contain a message selected by him, usually a quote from a philosophical tract or literary work, reflecting his concerns and thinking.

For the Christmas of 1965, which he did not live to see, he had chosen his message, an excerpt from Max Ehrmann's best known work, Desiderata: "Go placidly amid the noise and the haste and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly, and listen to others, even to the dull and ignorant; they too have their story. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world."

The spirit and essence of diplomacy, and also its rationale can seldom have been articulated more succinctly and felicitously, and with such clarity.

Megasthenes *is an eminent Bangladeshi columnist.*