ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS ON NIGERIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

MUAWIYA KABIR KURFI
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, NIGERIAN DEFENCE ACADEMY, KADUNA
kabir.muawiya2024@nda.edu.ng

IBRAHIM SHEHU GIWA
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, NIGERIAN DEFENCE ACADEMY, KADUNA
giwaibrahim68@gmail.com

MUHAMMAD ADAMU SANI
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, NIGERIAN DEFENCE ACADEMY, KADUNA STATE.
msjagaba@gmail.com

EMMANUEL ELIJAH
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, NIGERIAN DEFENCE ACADEMY, KADUNA
elijah.emmanuel2024@nda.edu.ng

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Keywords

Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Foreign Policy, Think Tanks, Institutional Autonomy, Nigeria

Abstract

Research Problem: *Despite its formal mandate to serve as Nigeria's primary foreign policy think tank, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) is widely perceived to have a limited impact on actual policy formulation. This significant gap remains underexplored in contemporary scholarly discourse.*
Methods/Theory: *This study employs a qualitative design based on secondary data and is anchored in institutional theory to analyze the structural and operational challenges facing the NIIA.*
Results: *Findings reveal that political interference, chronic funding instability, and an operational rivalry with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs significantly constrain the NIIA's autonomy, analytical capacity, and overall effectiveness as a policy-influencing institution.*
Conclusion: *The study concludes that without guaranteed autonomy and sustainable funding, the NIIA's role will remain peripheral to Nigeria's core foreign policy decision-making processes.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *This paper provides a contemporary institutional analysis of the NIIA, highlighting the criticality of political and financial independence for think-tank efficacy within the Global South's foreign policy architecture.*
Recommendation*: The study recommends that Nigeria should pursue legal and institutional reforms to formally guarantee the NIIA's operational and financial autonomy from the executive branch of government.*

Introduction

Over the years, the formulation of foreign policy has greatly been influenced by think tanks. This trend has become increasingly recognized and acknowledged in global discussions, as they serve as chief cornerstone for carrying out research, policy evaluation, and strategic advice in navigating the complexities of international relations (McGann, 2019). In Europe for instance, think tanks play an equally important role, particularly within the intricate, multi-layered governance structure of the European Union. Institutions like Bruegel based in Brussels and the European Council on Foreign Relations aim to create unified approaches to global challenges such as climate change, digital regulation, and gaining strategic autonomy from the United States and China (Ullrich & Donnelly, 2018). Their analyses are crucial for EU officials and legislators who need specialized, evidence-driven insights to create coherent policies for the 27 member states. They serve as facilitators of consensus and intermediaries of ideas, managing the variety of national interests within the Union to suggest practical frameworks for collective initiatives.

The landscape is distinctly different in emerging powers, where think tanks often align more closely with state objectives. In China, government-affiliated institutions like the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) are central to the country's foreign policy apparatus. They serve a dual purpose: conducting internal analysis for the Communist Party leadership and engaging in "track II diplomacy" to project China's strategic narratives and soften its image abroad (Zhu, 2018). Their role is less about independent critique and more about providing intellectual reinforcement for state-defined goals, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. This model contrasts with the more pluralistic, though still often elite-driven, think tank environments in North America and Europe.

In Nigeria, the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), established in 1961, was envisioned as a cornerstone for crafting a robust foreign policy to assert Nigeria's leadership in Africa and beyond (Osuntokun, 2005). Tasked with generating evidence-based insights and fostering diplomatic discourse, the NIIA has played a pivotal role in Nigeria's foreign policy, particularly in promoting Afrocentrism, non-alignment, and good neighborliness (Saliu, 2010). However, its influence has been constrained by challenges such as limited autonomy, inadequate funding, and insufficient capacity to address contemporary global issues like climate diplomacy, cybersecurity, and economic globalization (Eze, 2010; Tochukwu, 2014).

Despite its contributions, such as supporting Nigeria's mediation in African conflicts and its push for debt relief during the Obasanjo administration (1999–2007), the NIIA's effectiveness in shaping a proactive and coherent foreign policy remains under-explored (Akinterinwa, 2014). Think tanks like the Brookings Institution and Chatham House have successfully influenced policy through independent research and global partnerships, highlighting a gap in the NIIA's ability to emulate such models due to structural and operational constraints (McGann, 2019).

In Nigeria, the lack of comprehensive studies evaluating the NIIA's role, challenges, and potential to enhance Nigeria's global influence creates a critical knowledge gap. This study aims to fill this gap by assessing the NIIA's contributions to Nigeria's foreign policy, analyzing its challenges, and exploring prospects for strengthening its role in positioning Nigeria as a formidable global actor in an evolving international system.

Statement of the Problem

The Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), established in 1961, was designed to serve as a critical intellectual hub for shaping Nigeria's foreign policy through research, policy analysis, and strategic recommendations, aiming to enhance Nigeria's stature in global affairs (Osuntokun, 2005). However, its effectiveness has been hampered by persistent challenges, including limited autonomy due to heavy reliance on government funding and bureaucratic interference from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which compromises its ability to offer independent and innovative policy solutions (Eze, 2010). The lack of a robust, evidence-based framework from the NIIA has left Nigeria's foreign policy ill-equipped to address contemporary geopolitical complexities, undermining its aspirations for regional and global leadership.

Furthermore, the NIIA's role in fostering synergy between policymakers and other domestic institutions remains underdeveloped, resulting in fragmented foreign policy processes that fail to align with Nigeria's national interests (Akindele, 2005). The absence of a comprehensive assessment of the NIIA's contributions, challenges, and potential prospects hinders Nigeria's ability to leverage the institute's expertise in navigating a dynamic international system (Tuggar, 2025). This study seeks to address these gaps by critically evaluating the NIIA's role in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation, identifying structural and operational constraints, and exploring opportunities to enhance its relevance in positioning Nigeria as a formidable global actor.

Research Objectives

i. To examine the contribution of the Nigeria institute of international affairs to Nigeria's diplomatic decision-making processes in research, policy dialogue, and training of diplomats.

ii. To examine the key institutional challenges constraining the effectiveness of the Nigeria institute of international affairs.

Conceptual Clarifications

Nigeria Institute of International Affairs: An Overview

The Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) was established to function as a central hub for scholarly research and high-level dialogue on global issues, created to directly support Nigeria's burgeoning role in international diplomacy. Its foundational legal framework was designed to address the critical need for a dedicated institution that could provide informed, evidence-based insights into global trends and enhance the country's foreign policy formulation (McGann, 2019). The NIIA's core objective is to promote a deeper understanding of international relations and foster cooperation that aligns with Nigeria's strategic interests. To achieve this, the institute performs multifaceted functions, including conducting in-depth research, publishing analytical reports on global political and economic trends, and serving as a key advisory body to the government by offering expert policy recommendations. Furthermore, the NIIA actively organises conferences, seminars, and workshops, thereby facilitating essential collaboration and discourse among scholars, policymakers, and diplomats, which collectively strengthens Nigeria's diplomatic engagement on the world stage (Gana et al., 2023).

Concept of Foreign Policy

Like many concepts in the social sciences, foreign policy is a concept that is multifaceted

concept. Perhaps, this is so because it is commonly used in the fields of political science, history, international relations, diplomacy, sociology inter alia, to mean relationship between one nation state and the other. It is against such a premise that, Adnan (2014) had suggested that it is necessary to break the concept into foreign and policy. Accordingly, she sees Policy as "a decision or a guide of choosing actions to achieve one's goals". While "Foreign means anything beyond the state, to areas where state has no authority over territory and people". So, when combined, foreign policy, simply put, is a "guide for choosing actions outside the state boundary for achieving goals." (Adnan, 2014).

Interestingly, Adeniran (2007) noted that the concept of foreign policy is made up of three elements. One is the overall orientation and policy intention of a particular country toward another. The second element is the objective that a country seeks to achieve in her relations or dealings with other countries. The third element of foreign policy is the means to achieving that particular goal or objectives". That is to say, foreign policy is both the articulation of goals and the means of actualising those goals in international relations. Also, it could mean the numerous (defined or not) goals, values and different instruments which the government uses in making relations with different countries.

Foreign policy emanates from the interactions at the domestic and international environments. And it is more often than not formulated particularly for the promotion and defence of national interest which include: the preservation of national sovereignty; the defence of territorial integrity; the promotion of economic, military and diplomatic interest; the increase and maintenance of power and prestige so as to influence international events, to communicate one's capability to both potentials and actual allies and adversaries (Dauda, 2015:3; Dauda, Adie and Nwokedi, 2018).

Foreign policy can be described as a state's strategic framework comprising objectives, guiding principles, and actions that regulate its interactions with other nations, international organizations, and non-state entities in the global sphere (Hill, 2003). It embodies a government's intentional endeavors to protect national interests, which encompass security, economic well-being, and ideological aims, through means such as diplomacy, trade, military operations, and global collaboration (Carlsnaes, 2002). Scholars like Holsti (1995) suggest that foreign policy is an evolving process influenced by domestic elements (such as political leadership, public sentiment, and economic conditions) and external influences that balance realism and idealism in tackling global issues (Morgenthau, 1948). While they may provide temporary assistance, these measures are not enough to establish lasting financial autonomy. This supports Gana et al.'s (2023) assessment of funding instability as a crucial barrier and furthers Tochukwu's (2014) historical perspective, demonstrating that foreign policy is executed through instruments like diplomacy, sanctions, alliances, and engagement with international institutions, which reflect a state's priorities and its standing in the global system.

The Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) operates at this intersection by serving as a think tank that informs Nigeria's foreign policy through research, policy analysis, and intellectual discourse, which in turn shapes the conduct of its diplomatic relations (Osuntokun, 2005).

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, relying exclusively on the analysis of secondary data. This approach was deemed most appropriate for conducting an in-depth

institutional analysis of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) and the historical and structural challenges it faces. The research utilized a wide range of documentary evidence to ensure a comprehensive examination. The types of secondary data consulted included the NIIA Act (Cap. N113, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria), peer-reviewed academic journal articles, official government policy documents and reports, historical newspaper archives, and relevant commentary from reputable international affairs institutes.

As a qualitative study reliant on documentary evidence, no sampling was required. The data collection involved a systematic gathering of all relevant and accessible documents pertaining to the NIIA's establishment, mandate, operations, and perceived influence on Nigerian foreign policy. Thematic analysis was applied to the collected documents to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns, challenges, and themes related to institutional effectiveness, autonomy, and impact. This involved a process of carefully reading the materials, generating initial codes, collating these codes into potential themes, and reviewing and defining these themes to construct a coherent narrative of the constraints facing the NIIA.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Institutional Theory, a prominent sociological framework that examines how structures, rules, and routines become established as authoritative guidelines for social behavior. The theory posits that organizations are deeply embedded within a social framework of norms, values, and taken-for-granted assumptions that profoundly shape their processes and outcomes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Its core premise is that organizations seek legitimacy—social approval and acceptance within their environment, often leading them to adopt similar structures and practices (a process termed isomorphism) to ensure their survival and secure resources, even over technical efficiency (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Consequently, an institution's effectiveness and influence are derived from its conformance to these prevailing institutional norms and rules (Scott, 1995).

However, a key limitation of classical Institutional Theory in this context is its potential to overstate the desire for legitimacy from the global academic field while understating the paramount need for legitimacy from the domestic political field. The theory, largely developed in Western contexts, often assumes a environment where professional and global norms are the primary isomorphic pressures. For a state-owned think tank in a developing country like Nigeria, the imperative to conform to the expectations and demands of powerful domestic political actors, such as the executive branch and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), can be a far more powerful and constraining force than the pursuit of global academic recognition. This can create a fundamental tension between autonomous, research-driven analysis and politically palatable output.

The significance of this framework in evaluating the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) is therefore essential. The theory offers the means to comprehend the NIIA's quest for legitimacy amid a complicated institutional landscape that includes the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and the global academic community. This research broadens the application of Institutional Theory by illustrating how the isomorphic influences from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs may outweigh those from the global academic sphere in limiting an institution's independence. The NIIA's framework and outputs are likely a result of state coercion and mimetic isomorphism, emulating global think tanks; however, its effectiveness depends on its

capacity to manage these conflicting pressures. The theory clarifies how political interference and funding limitations can weaken its legitimacy as an independent analyst, whereas its conferences and publications serve as tools to promote norms and foster an alternate type of academic legitimacy. In the end, the NIIA's recognized authority and influence in foreign policy discussions are directly tied to its proficiency in obtaining legitimacy from these frequently opposing realms.

Findings and Discussions

The analysis reveals that the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA) fulfills its mandate through three primary, yet deeply interconnected, functions: research, policy dialogue, and diplomatic training. However, the effectiveness of each is significantly mediated by external pressures that constrain the Institute's autonomy.

Roles of Nigeria Institute of International Affairs on Research

The NIIA's research role, which is its foundational mandate, involves the continuous monitoring and investigation of international affairs to generate new knowledge. This is operationalized through conferences, publications, and international exchanges (Tochukwu, 2014). In theory, this aligns with the global isomorphic pressures of the academic field, where think tanks mimic established norms of rigorous, independent research to gain legitimacy. However, in practice, the interpretation of this finding suggests a more complex reality. The Institute's heavy reliance on government funding creates a form of coercive isomorphism, forcing the NIIA to align its research agenda with the immediate priorities of the government of the day to ensure its financial survival. This confirms the challenges of funding instability and political interference identified by Gana et al. (2023) but fundamentally challenges the more optimistic view of the NIIA's operational independence sometimes presented in international indexes (McGann, 2019). Therefore, it is evident that the Institute's ability to produce critical, long-term strategic analysis is fundamentally compromised by its financial dependency, limiting its role to that of a reactive body rather than a proactive shaper of policy.

Roles of Nigeria Institute of International Affairs on Policy Dialogue

The NIIA's commendable function in facilitating policy dialogues acts as a crucial bridge between research and practical policymaking. By organizing multi-stakeholder engagements on issues from public health to conflict resolution, the Institute provides a platform for evidence-informed discussion (Uneke et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2020). This role can be interpreted as the NIIA's attempt to build normative legitimacy by demonstrating its relevance to solving national problems. When compared with previous studies, this finding supports the work of Mitchell et al. (2023) on the ethical importance of such dialogues. However, a critical position must be taken: the ultimate value of these dialogues is negated if their evidence-based recommendations are systematically ignored by powerful political institutions. The discussion thus highlights a stark contrast between the NIIA's success in organizing discourse and its failure to ensure that this discourse translates into tangible policy outcomes, pointing to a deeper lack of influence within the domestic political field.

Roles of Nigeria Institute of International Affairs on on the Training of Diplomats

The NIIA's role in training diplomats is vital for maintaining a skilled cadre capable of advancing Nigeria's interests abroad (Jonathan et al., 2016). This finding indicates that the

Institute seeks mimetic legitimacy by replicating the diplomatic training functions of esteemed foreign policy institutes in the Global North. Yet, when compared to the systemic challenges outlined by Gana et al. (2023), including financial and administrative inefficiencies, it becomes clear that this function is underperforming relative to its potential. The interpretation of this finding is that the same constraints that limit the research function particularly a lack of sustainable, autonomous funding also prevent the NIIA from developing a world-class, continuous training program. Consequently, the Institute's capacity to profoundly strengthen Nigeria's diplomatic corps remains peripheral, ultimately sustaining a cycle where its potential as a pivotal foreign policy actor is perpetually unrealized.

Challenges Associated with the NIIA

In understanding the fundamental questions revolving around the role of NIIA in Nigeria's foreign policy formulation process, let us here look at the most pronounced challenges in discharging its duties, considering that it champions research on matters relating to international affairs. Also, given its indispensable role in developing a comprehensive and focused strategy of engagement with the rest of the world.

Political Interference

The analysis reveals that political interference constitutes a fundamental barrier to the NIIA's autonomy, significantly compromising its intellectual independence. This finding means that the institute operates under a form of coercive isomorphism, where its research agenda and policy recommendations are shaped by governmental priorities to ensure its own survival and funding, rather than by objective, evidence-based analysis. This confirms the central thesis of Okpevra & Usiemure (2024) on the pervasive nature of political influence but challenges the implicit assumption in McGann's (2019) global rankings that the NIIA operates with a significant degree of academic freedom. Furthermore, the NIIA's role is marginalized by overlapping responsibilities and turf wars with powerful ministries like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This lack of clear jurisdiction, as previously identified by Ade-Ibijola (2012), creates an institutional environment where the NIIA must constantly negotiate its space rather than focus on its core mandate. Therefore, it is evident that without structural safeguards to insulate it from direct political pressure and clearly delineate its authority, the NIIA's credibility as an independent think tank will remain perpetually undermined.

Furthermore, a critical misalignment exists between the NIIA's output and Nigeria's pressing domestic priorities. The institute's research often fails to adequately address foundational challenges such as poverty, insecurity, and economic development. This finding signifies a profound disconnect between the pursuit of academic legitimacy within international discourse and the imperative to achieve *pragmatic legitimacy* within its domestic context. It suggests the NIIA is more responsive to the global academic field's expectations than to the immediate needs of the Nigerian polity. This confirms the observations of Oshewolo et al. (2024) regarding the institute's limited relevance to national development. Moreover, the longstanding critique of its Afrocentric posture—that it prioritizes continental solidarity over national interest (Eze & Ogbuene, 2017) exemplifies this tension. This indicates that the institute's quest for a normative, Pan-African identity can conflict with its mandate to serve Nigeria's specific economic and strategic imperatives. Therefore, it is evident that the NIIA's perceived irrelevance in crucial policy debates stems from

its inability to effectively bridge this gap and demonstrate how its international focus directly serves Nigeria's core national interests.

Challenges of Funding

The NIIA's fundamental operational constraint is its precarious financial dependency on the federal government. This finding means that the institute is trapped in a cycle of coercive isomorphism, where its survival is contingent upon aligning its research agenda with the political priorities of its primary funder to secure inconsistent and often inadequate allocations. While foreign grants from bodies like the Ford Foundation (2010) this is not a new challenge but a persistent, decades-long structural weakness. The implications are severe, resulting in a debilitating brain drain, decaying infrastructure as noted by Awosusi (2020), and an inability to procure vital research materials. Therefore, it is evident that this financial model is fundamentally broken; without a strategic shift towards an endowment or legislation guaranteeing a fixed percentage of national revenue, the NIIA's intellectual and operational autonomy will remain permanently compromised, forever limiting its capacity to function as a world-class think tank.

Falling Standard of Educational System in Nigeria

The operational effectiveness of the NIIA is significantly constrained by its dependence on a deteriorating national educational system. This observation indicates that the institute's success is not only influenced by its own policies but is also fundamentally connected to the quality of human resources produced by Nigeria's universities. The legal obligation to primarily hire Nigerian personnel compels the NIIA to select from a pool of graduates who may lack essential analytical abilities and research expertise, resulting in inferior research outcomes and inadequate policy suggestions. This perspective challenges the prevailing focus on internal dynamics in much of the existing literature and introduces an important external factor. It validates Tochukwu's (2014) serious worries regarding recruitment challenges and implies that the institute's difficulties are a manifestation of a wider national educational crisis. Consequently, it is clear that the NIIA cannot achieve excellence while surrounded by institutional failures; any strategy aimed at improving its capabilities must encompass efforts to actively narrow the skills gap through comprehensive in-house training and international fellowship collaborations, as relying solely on internal recruitment is insufficient.

The NIIA-MFA Rivalry

The dysfunctional relationship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) represents a profound institutional crisis rooted in a struggle for autonomy and influence. This finding means that the NIIA operates under a state of permanent bureaucratic subjugation, where its mandate is overshadowed by a powerful ministry that views it as an appendage rather than an independent partner. The origins of this rivalry, formalized by Decree 35 of 1971 as noted by Awosusi (2020), have created a power dynamic that forces the NIIA to constantly resist MFA attempts to exert control, diverting energy from its core research functions. This confirms the historical accounts of Tochukwu (2014) and Awosusi (2020) regarding the enduring nature of this conflict. It starkly contrasts with the model of productive synergy between foreign ministries and policy institutes found in other nations. Therefore, it is evident that this rivalry is a primary cause of the NIIA's marginalization; a definitive legal and operational divorce from the MFA's administrative control is not merely beneficial but essential for the NIIA to establish its independent identity and provide the critical,

objective analysis that effective foreign policy requires.

Conclusion

This study investigated the perceived gap between the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs' (NIIA) formal mandate and its actual impact on foreign policy, employing a qualitative design and institutional theory to analyze secondary data. The analysis synthesizes that the NIIA's effectiveness is fundamentally constrained by a triad of interconnected challenges: chronic funding instability that creates financial dependency, pervasive political interference that compromises intellectual autonomy, and a debilitating institutional rivalry with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) that marginalizes its role.

Theoretically, this study implies a critical limitation of classical Institutional Theory in a developing world context. It demonstrates that for a state-owned think tank, the isomorphic pressure for political legitimacy from the domestic field—exerted by the government and the MFA—overwhelmingly supersedes the pursuit of professional and academic legitimacy from the global field. The NIIA's behavior is less about mimicking global think tanks for credibility and more about conforming to governmental expectations for survival.

The broader conceptual implication is that the very notion of a "government think tank" may constitute an inherent contradiction in terms without robust legal and operational safeguards. The findings suggest that an institution cannot effectively serve as both an arm of the state and an independent, critical policy advisor. Therefore, the NIIA's peripheral role in policy formulation is not a failure of execution but a predictable outcome of its structurally compromised position, underscoring the absolute criticality of autonomy for think-tank efficacy.

Recommendations

i. The NIIA should establish a Strategic Relevance Unit tasked with explicitly connecting international affairs research to Nigeria's core domestic priorities. This unit would be specifically mandated to: (a) systematically analyze how global trends and foreign policy decisions impact critical domestic challenges including poverty reduction, economic development, and national security; (b) produce policy briefs that translate international expertise into practical solutions for domestic policymakers; and (c) create a public-facing dashboard demonstrating the tangible connections between the NIIA's work and Nigeria's national development goals.

ii. The NIIA's enabling law should be comprehensively amended to remove it from the administrative supervision of the MFA and re-establish it as a fully independent statutory body, potentially with a direct reporting line to the National Assembly. This structural change is essential to insulate it from direct executive control, eliminate institutional rivalry, and allow it to provide objective, critical analysis without fear of political reprisal.

iii. The National Assembly should pass legislation establishing a statutory funding framework for the NIIA. This could be achieved by mandating a fixed percentage of the national budget to be allocated to the institute or by creating an independent endowment fund. This would ensure predictable, sustainable financing, reduce vulnerability to political manipulation through budgetary controls, and enable long-term strategic research planning.

iv. The NIIA should establish formal, structured partnership programs with internationally renowned think tanks and academic institutions. These partnerships should include funded fellowship schemes, staff exchange programs, and joint certification courses designed to systematically bridge the human capital skills gap, mitigate local educational deficiencies, and facilitate the transfer of global best practices in policy research and analysis.

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