

CDS vs NDA: Difference Between Exams, Eligibility & Career

Choosing between **CDS (Combined Defence Services)** and **NDA (National Defence Academy)** is one of the most common dilemmas for defence aspirants. Both exams are conducted by **UPSC**, both lead to a prestigious career as an **officer in the Indian Armed Forces**, yet they differ significantly in terms of **eligibility, exam pattern, training, and career path**.

This article provides a **complete comparison of CDS vs NDA**, covering **exam differences, eligibility criteria, age limit, education, training, and career prospects**, helping aspirants decide **which exam suits them best**.

What Is NDA Exam?

The **National Defence Academy (NDA)** exam is conducted twice a year by UPSC for candidates who wish to join the **Army, Navy, or Air Force immediately after Class 12**.

- Entry at a **younger age**
- Joint training of Army, Navy & Air Force cadets
- Training at **NDA, Khadakwasla**

What Is CDS Exam?

The **Combined Defence Services (CDS)** exam is conducted for **graduates** aiming to become officers in:

- Indian Military Academy (IMA)
- Indian Naval Academy (INA)
- Air Force Academy (AFA)
- Officers' Training Academy (OTA)

CDS is ideal for candidates who decide to join defence **after graduation**.

CDS vs NDA: Key Differences at a Glance

Feature	NDA	CDS
Conducting Body	UPSC	UPSC
Entry Level	After Class 12	After Graduation

Feature	NDA	CDS
Age at Entry	Younger	Relatively older
Exam Frequency	Twice a year	Twice a year
Gender Eligibility	Men & Women	Men & Women
Training Duration	3 Years (NDA) + Academy	Academy-specific
Rank on Commission	Lieutenant / Flying Officer	Lieutenant / Flying Officer

CDS vs NDA Eligibility Criteria Comparison

Educational Qualification

Criteria	NDA	CDS
Minimum Qualification	10+2	Graduation
Army	Any stream (12th)	Any Bachelor's Degree
Navy	10+2 with PCM	Engineering Degree
Air Force	10+2 with PCM	Graduate with PCM / Engineering

Age Limit Comparison

Exam	Age Limit
NDA	16.5 – 19.5 years
CDS	19 – 25 years (academy-wise)

NDA is ideal for early starters, while CDS suits graduates.

Marital Status

Exam	Marital Status
NDA	Unmarried only
CDS	Unmarried for IMA/INA/AFA, Married allowed for OTA

CDS vs NDA Exam Pattern Comparison

NDA Written Exam

Subject	Marks
Mathematics	300
GAT (English + GK)	600
Total	900

CDS Written Exam

Academy	Subjects	Total Marks
IMA / INA / AFA	English, GK, Maths	300
OTA	English, GK	200

Difficulty Level

Aspect	NDA	CDS
Maths Level	Higher (10+2)	Moderate (Class 10)
GK Level	Moderate	Tougher & Wider
English	Moderate	Moderate-High

Training Comparison: NDA vs CDS

NDA Training

- **3 years at NDA, Khadakwasla**
- Joint training of all three services
- Followed by **1-1.5 years** at respective academies
- Total training: **4-4.5 years**

CDS Training

Academy	Training Duration
IMA	18 months
INA	22 weeks
AFA	~74 weeks
OTA	49 weeks

CDS candidates complete training **faster** than NDA cadets.

Career Growth: NDA vs CDS

Rank on Commission (Same for Both)

- Lieutenant (Army)
- Sub-Lieutenant (Navy)
- Flying Officer (Air Force)

Long-Term Career

Aspect	NDA	CDS
Promotion Speed	Faster (early entry)	Slightly slower
Leadership Exposure	Very High	High
Command Opportunities	Earlier	Slightly later

NDA officers get seniority advantage due to early entry.

Which Is Better: NDA or CDS?

Choose NDA If:

- You are **16.5-19.5 years old**
- You want an **early defence career**
- You are ready for long training
- You want strong leadership grooming from teenage years

Choose CDS If:

- You are a **graduate**
- You decided to join defence later
- You want **shorter training duration**
- You prefer flexibility (especially OTA entry)

Can a Candidate Apply for Both NDA and CDS?

Yes

If you meet eligibility conditions, you can:

- Apply for **NDA after Class 12**
- Apply for **CDS after Graduation**

Many officers have cleared **both exams at different stages**.

CDS vs NDA: Salary & Perks (Same for Both)

- Starting Salary: **₹56,100 (Level 10 Pay Matrix)**
- Military Service Pay: **₹15,500**
- Free accommodation
- Medical facilities

- LTC & Canteen facilities
- Pension & post-retirement benefits

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) - CDS vs NDA

Q1. Is NDA better than CDS?

Neither is better; both are **different entry routes**. NDA offers early entry, CDS offers graduate-level entry.

Q2. Can women apply for both NDA and CDS?

Yes, women can apply for **NDA and CDS (OTA)**.

Q3. Which exam is tougher - CDS or NDA?

NDA Maths is tougher, while **CDS GK is more challenging**.

Q4. Do NDA officers get higher rank than CDS officers?

No, rank is same, but **NDA officers gain seniority earlier**.

Q5. Is CDS training easier than NDA?

CDS training is **shorter but equally rigorous**.

Q6. Which exam has more vacancies?

Generally, **NDA has more vacancies** than CDS.

Conclusion

Both **CDS and NDA** are prestigious gateways to becoming an officer in the Indian Armed Forces. The right choice depends on **age, education level, career timing, and personal readiness**. NDA builds officers from a young age, while CDS offers a powerful opportunity for graduates to join the forces with maturity and academic experience.

No matter which path you choose, **dedication, discipline, and determination** remain the real keys to success.

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