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1. Act that punishes organised cheating in government exams comes into effect

Why in News?



The Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Bill, 2024 that has provision for up to five years' imprisonment and a fine of up to ₹1 crore for malpractices and organised cheating in government recruitment exams was notified by the Union government to come into effect from June 21.

The University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test 2024 (UGC-NET) examination that was cancelled recently on grounds of being compromised and is being investigated by the Central Bureau of Investigation.

List of offences

1. The Act mentions punishments for "leakage of question paper or answer key", "directly or indirectly assisting the candidate in any manner unauthorisedly in the public examination" and "tampering with the computer network or a computer resource or a computer system" as offences done by a person, group of persons or institutions.

2. Besides these, "creation of fake website to cheat or for monetary gain", "conduct of fake examination, issuance of fake admit cards or offer letters to cheat or for monetary gain" and "manipulation in seating arrangements, allocation of dates and shifts for the candidates to facilitate adopting unfair means in examinations" are also among the offences punishable under the law.

Punishment

Any person or persons resorting to unfair means and offences under this Act shall be punished with imprisonment for a term not less than three years but which may extend to five years and with fine up to ₹10 lakh.

Service provider

A service provider, engaged by the public examination authority for conduct of examinations, shall also be liable to be punished with imposition of a fine up to ₹1 crore "and proportionate cost of examination shall also be recovered" from it, according to the Act.

Such service providers shall also be barred from being assigned with any responsibility for the conduct of any public examination for a period of four years.

The Act defines service provider as any agency, organisation, body, association of persons, business entity, company, partnership or single proprietorship firm, including its associates, sub-contractors and provider of support of any computer resource or any material, by whatever name it may be called, "which is engaged by the public examination authority for conduct of public examination".

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: The Hindu

2. Why the Russia-North Korea pact is a big deal

Introduction

Russia President Vladimir Putin's recent Pyongyang visit culminated with a landmark pact between Russia and North Korea for "immediate military assistance if either faces armed aggression".



Russia-North Korea Relations

After World War II, the erstwhile Soviet Union wanted the installation of a communist regime in Korea, and offered significant military assistance to North Korea founder Kim Il Sung during the Korean War. After hostilities ended, the USSR, along with China, provided significant military and other aid to the communist North.

The two nations solidified their alliance in 1961, with the signing of the Russo-North Korea Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, which like the latest pact contained a mutual defence agreement. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, this treaty was voided and relations temporarily deteriorated.

Since the early 2000s, however, Putin-ruled Russia has gotten closer to the Kim-family ruled North Korea regime. That being said, Russia still did not back North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and for a time, even supported sanctions against the country aimed at curbing Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities.

Things changed for good in 2022, as Russia invaded Ukraine and Putin found himself increasingly isolated, internationally. Today, the world is as divided as it has been since the end of the Cold War, Russia and North Korea stand together against the Western liberal order, based on highly pragmatic considerations.

What the pact says

The pact between Russia and North Korea talks about cooperation on a wide range of issues, including mutual military support, and unspecified technological assistance. Crucial is the mutual defence provisions.

"In case any one of the two sides is put in a state of war by an armed invasion from an individual state or several states, the other side shall provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay.

The provision of technological assistance is likely to be crucial. Currently, North Korea is believed to possess nuclear weapons but lacks critical missile guidance systems, cutting-edge warhead design, and re-entry vehicle technology, precluding its development of advanced, long-range nuclear weapons.

Strategic implications

1. For South Korea and Japan, this treaty is likely to be perceived as a direct security threat. Both countries have long been concerned about North Korea's nuclear program, and military strength. The Russian security umbrella will only add to these concerns.

This is likely to push both countries to strengthen their defences and rethink their security policies. Japan has already moved away from its long-standing pacifist foreign policy, and is in the process of building its military might. South Korea convened an emergency meeting of its national security council in response, and said it will now consider sending arms to Ukraine, something which it had thus far resisted.

2. Both South Korea and Japan are likely going to further cement their alliance with the United States, in response. The United States has already reaffirmed its commitment to its allies.

NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg too has expressed deep concern about the pact, highlighting the risks to global security and the potential for increased nuclear proliferation.

3. The Russia-North Korea pact could also encourage similar partnerships, elsewhere, most notably with Iran. For the West, these will continue to pose a major threat.

4. China, a traditional ally to North Korea, is likely to be conflicted about the development. While the treaty strengthens the anti-West bulwark in Asia, China would be wary of Russia's growing military collaboration with North Korea, which could undermine its near-exclusive geopolitical influence over Pyongyang. It would also be concerned about a greater Western footprint in Asia, as a result of this development.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

3. Post Office Act, 2023 comes into force

Introduction

The Post Office Act came into force on June 18. The Act came in to "consolidate and amend the law relating to Post Office in India," which today provides many services beyond simply mail delivery, the primary concern of the older Indian Post Office Act of 1898.

The Post Office network today has become a vehicle for delivery of different citizen-centric services, which necessitated the repeal enactment of a new law, the Act states.



Post officers can “intercept” any item

Repealing the 125-year-old Indian Post Office Act of 1898, the Act contains provisions that allow the Centre to intercept, open, or detain any item, and deliver it to customs authorities.

Notably, Section 9 of the Act allows the Centre to, by notification, empower any officer to “intercept, open or detain any item” in the interest of state security, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, emergency, public safety, or contravention of other laws. This provision also allows post officers to hand over postal items to customs authorities if they are suspected to contain any prohibited item, or if such items are liable to duty. This is similar to Sections 19, 25, and 26 of the 1898 Act.

Section 19(1) disallowed persons from sending by post “any explosive, dangerous, filthy, noxious or deleterious substance, any sharp instrument not properly protected, or any living creature which is either noxious or likely to injure postal articles” or postal service officers in the course of transmission.

Furthermore, the power to intercept any prohibited or restricted articles during transmission by post, or any postal article for public good during emergency or in the interest of public safety could also be exercised by the government and its officials under Sections 25 and 26 of the 1898 Act.

The Law Commission in 1968, while examining the 1898 Act, observed that the term emergency is not explicitly defined, thereby allowing significant discretion while intercepting goods.

The Post Office exempt from liability

Besides this, Section 10 exempts the Post Office and its officer from “any liability by reason of any loss, mis-delivery, delay, or damage in course of any service provided by the Post Office,” except such liability as may be prescribed. The 1898 Act too exempted the government from liability for any lapses in postal service, except where such liability was undertaken expressly.

Moreover, the Act removes all penalties and offences under the 1898 Act. For example, offences committed by post office officials such as misconduct, fraud, and theft, among others, have been deleted entirely. At the same time, if anyone refuses or neglects to pay the charges for availing a service provided by the Post Office, such amount shall be recoverable “as if it were an arrear of land revenue due” from them.

Removes Centre’s exclusivity

The Act has removed Section 4 of the 1898 Act, which allowed the Centre the exclusive privilege of conveying by post, from one place to another, all letters.

Effectively, this exclusivity was already lost by the 1980s, with the rise of private courier services. Since neither the Post Office Act of 1898 nor the Indian Post Office Rules, 1933 had defined

the term "letter" anywhere, courier services bypassed the 1898 law by simply calling their couriers "documents" and "parcels", rather than "letters."

The Act, for the first time, regulates private courier services by bringing it under its ambit. While the government acknowledges its lack of exclusivity, it has also widened the ambit of the law in order to intercept and detain any postal article, as opposed to just letters.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

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