

## Backing for neutral, nuke-free Asean

By Kamrul Idris

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. — Russia is prepared to underwrite the collective security of a nuclear-free and politically neutral Asean, its Vice-President, Mr Alexander Rutskoi, said today.

"We will vote with both hands raised for proposals on collective measures to maintain security in the region," he said in a special address at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations here.

"We are prepared to back up initiatives going in that direction and to take full part in them," he said.

"Russia reiterates its willingness to participate in and serve as a guarantor for any regional agreements that would establish a nuclear-free status for South-East Asia," he told an audience of about 100 diplomats, academics and officials.

"We highly appreciate

Malaysia's support for the principle of nuclear weapons non-proliferation and are in favour of this approach becoming predominant in the Asia-Pacific region.

"We are against any power's hegemony in any form replacing the former bipolar world pattern."

Rutskoi is the first Russian leader to address a Malaysian audience since diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the USSR were established in 1967.

He said that bloc-based security arrangements could not ensure lasting peace. He is in favour of a framework based on defensive sufficiency and an equidistant role for each of the major powers.

"In the military field, we all could share as common the principle of reasonable defensive sufficiency with a compact defence potential threatening no one."

During his hour-long speech, which was preceded by an introduction from Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Rutskoi urged an end to any residual suspicion arising out of the ideological divide that had once pitched most of non-communist South-East Asia against the former Soviet Union.

Russia's foreign policy, long dictated by the Cold War, is undergoing a "renovation".

"The radius of our policy used to be drawn up primarily to the extent of Euro-American areas as it were, while forgetting that Russia is Euro-Asian," he said.

"Now Russia is better than ever aware of the fact that it belongs to Eurasia and of its special bridge-building mission between Asia, Europe and America."

With ideological barricades demolished, relations with Asia, and particularly

Asean, would now lay in "mutually beneficial and equal trade and economic links that set the stage for a promising partnership."

Economic and trade cooperation should also include the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East.

Russia's considerable and formerly closed defence industry is being opened up and Rutskoi encourages prospective Asean trade partners to evaluate its high-tech hardware.

He advocates the setting up of a Russia-Malaysia Trading House "to serve as conduit for contacts and a centre for consulting services".

However, Rutskoi conceded that the unstable domestic situation, caused by market reforms on an economy long cossetted by central planning and without an enterprising private sector, made foreigners reluctant to do business in Russia.