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Rice and Gates in Moscow for heated talks over Kosovo

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U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates are visiting Moscow to discuss on several heated issues with highest Russian officials, including the status of Kosovo, the American anti-missile program and the next set of sanctions against Iran.

Rice and Gates are meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday, as their Russian counterparts Sergey Lavrov and Anatoly Serdyukov.

One of the key Kosovo topics will be the American rhetorical support for Kosovo's independence after the mandate of the Contact Group Troika expires on December 10.

The US and Russia have remained firmly opposed on the fate of the Serbian province this week at a UN Security Council session: Washington is favoring an imposed Kosovo's secession from Serbia, while Moscow insists that any solution must be accepted by both sides and be in line with international law regarding the territorial integrity of sovereign states.

In addition, two sides are expected to continue the talks on an accord limiting conventional forces in Europe, which is directly connected with U.S.'s plan to deploy some 10 missile-interceptors in eastern Europe in next four years – the move Moscow strongly objected.

Putin is vowing to quit an accord limiting conventional forces in Europe by December 12 if the U.S. goes forward with a missile defense system in eastern Europe.

“We are well aware of the calendar and well aware that there are some tough issues coming up in December,” U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried said last week.

Dimitri Simes, president of the Washington-based Nixon Center, argues that Kosovo may prove to be “incendiary”.

Simes fears a scenario in which the December 10 deadline for a settlement passes, Kosovo declares independence and the U.S. recognizes it.

Russia could retaliate by pressuring the pro-U.S. government of Georgia through annexing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two regions that broke away from Georgia with Russian military help, Simes said.