

Second airship launched in test of missile defense system

August 19 2015, by David Dishneau

On Wednesday, The North American Aerospace Defense Command launched the second of two helium-filled airships near Baltimore to test an East Coast missile defense system. The launch at the Army's Aberdeen Proving Ground completes the aerial part of the Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System, or JLENS. Here's what it's all about:

THE BALLONS:

The unmanned, white aerostats are 80 feet long and tethered to concrete pads 4 miles apart. They're designed to float at 10,000 feet, about one-third as high as a [commercial airliner](#)'s cruising altitude.

RADAR, NOT WEAPONS

The airships carry sophisticated radar, not weapons. One balloon continuously scans 360 degrees from upstate New York to North Carolina's Outer Banks, and as far west as central Ohio. The other carries precision radar to help the military on the ground pinpoint and destroy enemy missiles with air-, sea- or land-based weapons.

THREE-YEAR TEST

The first aerostat was launched in December for a three-year test of the system. The project, built by Raytheon Co. of Waltham, Massachusetts, and TCOM L.P. of Columbia, Maryland, has cost the government about \$2.8 billion so far. Congress approved another \$43.3 million in December for the first year of the test.

COST SAVINGS

Proponents say JLENS will save money in the long run by reducing the need for surveillance by conventional aircraft. Raytheon says operating JLENS will cost five to seven times less than flying a fleet of aircraft to cover the same area over the same time period.

BATTLE-TESTED

The government has deployed tethered airships near the Mexican border, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the Caribbean Ocean to combat drug smuggling.

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