Anti-missile system could help protect Navy

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Defense officials hope a successful missile test could be the first step in revolutionizing American warships’ ability to handle the biggest threats projected for the 21st century in two key areas of the world: the Persian Gulf and the Western Pacific.

In the test, which took place Saturday at White Sands Missile Range, N.M., and was announced Monday, a Raytheon-built pair of unmanned airships detected an anti-ship cruise missile target and put a Navy interceptor on course to destroy it mid-flight. Navy commanders say high-speed anti-ship missiles are one of the biggest threats in a potential conflict with China, and they have searched for a way to increase their ability to defeat them.

Meanwhile, in the Persian Gulf, American warships are vulnerable to massed swarms of small, high-speed attack craft that could overwhelm their defenses. The aerostats, which command a wide field of view from their perspective about 10,000 feet in the air, could help Navy commanders spot an attacking swarm early and give more time to evade or counterattack.

Raytheon’s Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System — or “JLENS” — also could go to work defending Army ground posts, which already use tethered aerostats in Afghanistan.

“JLENS is a proven asset that, when deployed, will protect U.S. and coalition lives,” company vice president Dave Gulla said Monday in an announcement. “JLENS’s long-range surveillance capability extends the battle space and gives commanders more time to identify and respond to incoming threats, instead of the handful of seconds they have today.”

JLENS consists of two unmanned, tethered airships reeled out from ground stations — for Navy purposes, they’d need to be on a coastline. When they’re deployed at their full 10,000-foot altitude, the mini-blimps can monitor about 340 miles in every direction, and they’re integrated with the systems aboard American warships and aircraft so that troops monitoring the battle network should be able to see what the aerostats see.

But they can do more than just observe, Raytheon says — company officials said Saturday’s test proves the system could help surface warships defend themselves. The company says it has also tracked individual cars and boats on a test range in Utah, suggesting that it could monitor the vital Strait of Hormuz, for example, and give American commanders a complete picture of all the vessels in the area.

Raytheon company officials said Monday that they want American combatant commanders to test JLENS in a real-life scenario, but it wasn’t immediately clear how soon that could happen. Company officials also acknowledged they didn’t know how JLENS would play with other Navy programs designed to protect the fleet from air threats, including a new version of Northrop Grumman’s E-2 Hawkeye airborne early warning aircraft.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert and Air Force leaders have stressed the need to make sure that their fleets of today and tomorrow can communicate effectively across service lines in support of their “Air-Sea Battle” concept to preserve American access in the Western Pacific. (c) PoliticoPro

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