

U.S. Launches Two Experimental Missile Defense Satellites

By [Global Research](#)

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A NASA-managed rocket launched two experimental satellites designed to track ballistic missiles Friday in a test flight for the United States Missile Defense Agency.

The Delta 2 rocket blasted off at 8:20 a.m. EDT (1220 GMT) from the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station in Florida carrying two Space Tracking Surveillance System (STSS) satellites on a technology demonstration mission. They reached orbit just under an hour later.

“With confirmation of the payload’s delivery into the correct orbit, the launch is a success,” said Omar Baez, launch director for NASA’s Launch Services Program headquartered at Kennedy Space Center, in a statement. The launch was delayed by two days due to weather and technical glitches.

The two STSS demonstration satellites form part of the Missile Defense Agency’s layered Ballistic Mission Defense System. They are designed to demonstrate the ability of tracking ballistic missiles in every stage of flight, something U.S. space-based assets cannot currently do.

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The satellites were originally built by Northrop Grumman for an earlier flight demonstration program that was scrapped in 1999. The project was revived in 2002 when the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) awarded Northrop Grumman an \$868 million contract to ready the satellites for launch. To date, \$1.5 billion have been spent on the project.

“Even though the hardware was built in the 1990s, when the two STSS demonstrators are on orbit, they will bring a unique capability to the MDA,” Gabe Watson, Northrop Grumman’s STSS program manager, told [SPACE.com](#) in June. “We can track missiles in every stage of flight, from launch to intercept, and do hit assessment as well. If the MDA wants to intercept missiles in the ascent phase, they will need additional data that [current missile warning satellites] don’t provide.”

The STSS satellites follow NASA’s launch of another missile defense satellite – the STSS Advanced Technology Risk Reduction spacecraft – in early May. They weigh about 5,000 pounds (2,267 kg) and are equipped with a staring sensor similar to those used on other Air Force defense satellites. But they also carry a multi-band infrared sensor to track missiles.

At least two tests of the STSS system are planned using dedicated missile launches to check the satellites’ performance. They may also play a role in two other tests with other defense systems such as the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense system, STSS program officials have said.

The new STSS satellites are expected to undergo a three-month checkout phase by Northrop Grumman, which will operate them from the Schriever Air Force Base in Colorado. A six-month test period is expected to follow.

Congress has not yet approved any funding for an operational version of the missile defense satellites, though military officials may pursue funds to begin that work in 2011 if the STSS demonstration satellites prove to be effective.

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