The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 was a wake-up call for Australia. Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser warned that the Soviets had ‘virtually pushed détente aside’, and if Russia took control of Middle East oil then the Australian economy could be destroyed. The ability of the Soviet Union to direct military power into the Indian Ocean was not only posing a threat to our friends and partners in Southeast Asia, it threatened Australia and its interests. Australia’s response was to offer the US military support.

Early in 1980, Fraser offered US President Jimmy Carter access to Australian military facilities, including use of the naval base at Cockburn Sound in Western Australia and staging facilities in Darwin for B-52 bombers. In addition, ‘Australia would need to further develop its role and relationships in the Southeast Asian and South Pacific regions as part of overall policies directed at minimising Soviet influence in these regions.’ Although the RAAF had conducted maritime patrols in the Indian Ocean, on and off, throughout much of the 1970s, Cabinet agreed that it was now necessary to bolster defence activities in the Indian Ocean with the continuous deployment of RAAF long range maritime patrol aircraft.

Operational planning commenced on 18 February 1980 when No 92 Wing was advised that Government policy to increase surveillance of the Indian Ocean included a long term detachment of P-3 Orion aircraft to RAAF Base Butterworth in Malaysia, subject to Malaysian Government concurrence. Operational support activities to set up a Butterworth detachment commenced in March, including upgrades to the Operations Room and communication facilities, while discussions with Malaysia were underway. On 3 December the Malaysian Government agreed to the deployment of up to three P-3 Orions at Butterworth. This was the genesis of Operation Gateway—the deployment of RAAF P-3 Orion aircraft to conduct maritime surveillance of the Indian Ocean, Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea.

Operation Gateway commenced on 1 February 1981 when the first detachment of 35 personnel from No 11 Squadron, flew into Butterworth with the first P-3 Orion. Two days later, 11 aircrew arrived on a second P-3. Group Captain Graeme Smith was the first commander of the detachment from No 92 Wing at Butterworth.

Flying operations commenced on 5 February and continued with routine patrols conducted on five or six days each week. At the end of their 30-day deployment, detachment personnel and aircraft were rotated with others from Nos 10, 11 or 292 Squadrons. In this way, the Operation Gateway aircraft were able to maintain a strong presence over the neighbouring waters throughout much of the year.

The P-3 Orion was originally designed for detecting surface and sub-surface threats. During the later part of the Cold War this aircraft type was a critical deterrent...
in the never-ending struggle to detect, localise, track, and identify Soviet submarines—a process known as a ‘prosecution’. RAAF Orions were able to ‘prosecute’ Soviet submarines before and after they transited the Straits of Malacca, frequently cooperating with US Navy P-3s and warships that continued to prosecute the same targets once they left the RAAF’s designated area of responsibility. These missions were carried out with all the determination that would normally be associated with attacking enemy surface and sub-surface targets during time of war, short of live weapons release.

The first of many submarine prosecutions undertaken under Operation Gateway commenced on 21 February 1982 with the crew of a P-3 Orion from No 10 Squadron prosecuting a Soviet Echo II class submarine. Over the next five days Orion crews used radar and sonobuoys to detect, track and identify the submarine. Soviet submarines, running on the surface and accompanied by one or two escort vessels, would take four or five days to transit through the Straits of Malacca before entering the western Indian Ocean. The RAAF aircraft from Butterworth would follow the submarine’s progress with daily relocates, while a third aircraft would be deployed from RAAF Base Edinburgh for the duration of the activity.

Throughout the surface transit, acoustic data would be gathered to assist in the submerged tracking phase which would follow. ‘Sinker’ (the activity of the submarine submerging) would normally take place during darkness, with the Soviets employing a variety of deception tactics to hinder the ongoing surveillance of the submerged submarine. Under-surface tracking by aircrews had varying success, ranging from immediate loss without further contact to extended tracking, loss, and then regaining of contact. Soviet submarines would use various countermeasures to prevent successful underwater tracking, such as using sonar to confuse and jam the sonar picture, deploying sound decoys, explosive jammers and mechanical noise makers.

As Australian P-3 aircrews prosecuted Soviet submarines and their escort vessels, they were illuminated by radar, and even fired at with flares. The Soviets either stopped to collect the disposable sonobuoys that the Orions dropped, or else used small arms fire to sink them. On one occasion in October 1982 the crew of a RAAF aircraft believed that small arms fire was directed at them, although probably more for show than effect. On an earlier occasion, during a night sortie in June 1982, an aircraft was struck in the searchlight by a flare fired from either a Soviet Victor III class nuclear submarine or its escort. Tension remained high during every prosecution, and when RAAF aircraft were illuminated by Soviet fire control radar there was little chance of avoidance if the Cold War suddenly turned hot.

The Cold War ended in 1989 but Operation Gateway continues to this day with a new focus on maritime security. Although the level of commitment has reduced since the early 1980s, RAAF P-3 Orion aircraft continue to make a significant contribution to regional security by monitoring normalcy patterns, conducting anti-piracy patrols and helping to train the Royal Malaysian Air Force in maritime surveillance. It remains an important part of Australia’s commitment to the Five Power Defence Arrangements.

- The RAAF presence in the Indian Ocean and South China Sea strengthened our relationship with friends and partners in the region, and helped to deter Soviet aggression.
- RAAF maritime surveillance aircraft detected, tracked and identified Soviet submarines during the later stages of the Cold War under Operation Gateway.
- Maritime surveillance and anti-submarine warfare remain essential capabilities for the defence of Australia and its interests.