At the center of the Caspian Sea energy complex is a land of the periphery. A place on the margins, a place between places: Azerbaijan’s identity has forever been a contested proposition. It is a ‘liminal realm’, a place of the threshold, existentially ‘neither here nor there’.¹ By assuming an identity defined in terms of energy, Azerbaijan has ‘centered’ its development on ‘Euro-Atlantic’ geopolitical preferences. But in neither a domestic order that is aggressively secular at a time of global Islamist mobilisation, nor a foreign policy that ostentatiously associates a Muslim polity with the state of Israel, nor a strategic decision to associate a country of the southern Caucasus with the Euro-Atlantic community, can this centering be considered a natural development. And, now, amidst crisis in Eurasia and uncertainty within the Euro-Atlantic system, Azerbaijan may be tempted, on the strength of its wealth and its attractions, to convert this centering into a strategic autonomy.

Shaped by the insecurities of a vulnerable actor with a good deal to lose, Azerbaijan’s ‘unnatural act’ has been purchased both exogenously with the currency of Euro-Atlantic energy and geopolitical priorities as well as indigenously through the fashioning of a ‘petro-polity’, in order to ease the burdens of liminality. Integral to the functioning of this dialectic is the play of socially constructed threats, weaponized through the use of what Mary Douglas called a ‘forensic model of danger’, the process by which the defining of danger, or risk, becomes a political act (Douglas, 1990; 2002: xix).

Azerbaijan exists within an ensemble of contradictions and dangers: at the heart of the Caspian energy complex, yet burdened by the contested identity claims inherent in a frontier space; consigned to a violent
and unforgiving neighbourhood, but able still to escape its parochial constraints; an emblem of late-Soviet decay, but now a glittering prize of energy wealth. Some of these dangers may be traced to its political structure, its family-dominated ‘command-state’ or its unending ‘frozen conflict’ with Armenia. Others, of a geopolitical nature, can be located within the tensions within Euro-Atlanticism and Russia’s Eurasianism at one level; and the stresses within the non-Arab Middle Eastern triangle, comprised of Israel, Turkey and Iran, at another. Still a third domain of danger has emerged through North America’s ‘energy revolution’, carrying with it the prospect that the United States might develop into a rival to Azerbaijan for Europe’s affections (Scott, 2012; International Energy Agency, 2012).

Azerbaijan is an energy actor in a hurry to institutionalise its centering. This chapter seeks to examine the Azeri rites of passage, as a story of development and statecraft, conjugated by the fluctuations in energy markets and geopolitics. The question considered here is whether the suppleness of Azeri statecraft, necessary for it to pursue a policy of equilibrium between the Euro-Atlantic powers and Russia; between Turkey, Iran and Israel; and shaped by the vicissitudes of energy markets and geopolitical change; is compatible with the rigidity of Azerbaijan’s domestic arrangements. It is suggested here that the intensity of this contrast will impose limits on the Azeri quest to convert its centering into strategic autonomy.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the ways in which changes in the international energy markets, occasioned by the North American ‘energy revolution’ have influenced western discourse about Azerbaijan and its region. It then examines the question of Azeri liminality and the ways in which ‘forensic blaming’, the manipulation of threat by Azeri leaders, has contributed to the system’s historic centering. From there, contemporary Azerbaijan is thrice considered: first in terms of the nature of its ‘petro-polity’, then in the context of its energy complex and, finally, in light of the geopolitical and geo-economic implications of Baku’s struggle for centering, and even autonomy, amidst Eurasia’s turmoil.

**Vanities**

About the nature and scope of the energy revolution in North America, nothing of a consensus exists. What has emerged, however, is a different discourse, a different medley of risk-and-reward calculation (Yergin, 2012). The vision of the United States as ‘the world’s largest