It is to this challenging issue that the two books under review devote a combined 800 pages of analysis and advocacy. Both authors bring to their task impeccable credentials. Both combine distinguished academic careers with practical experience at a high level in their respective governments.

Chung-in Moon is a professor at Yonsei University in Seoul who has also taught at Williams College in Massachusetts and the University of California, San Diego; his government service in South Korea includes a cabinet-level post as the chair of a presidential committee and an ambassadorship in international security affairs. Most important, perhaps, is his participation as an academic advisor during the two inter-Korean summits that he analyzes in his book.

Victor Cha is a professor at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. From 2004 to 2007, he served as Director of Asian Affairs at the National Security Council under US President George W. Bush. Like Moon, Cha had a rare chance to participate in negotiations with North Korea during his tenure as the deputy head of the US delegation to the Six-Party Talks aimed at realizing the country’s denuclearization.

As the subtitle of Moon’s book makes clear, he is a “dove” who champions the “Sunshine Policy” towards North Korea; Cha, meanwhile, is a hardliner who believes that Pyongyang egregiously exploited Seoul’s olive branch with a “moonshine policy.” In Cha’s view, while the governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun “pursued unconditional economic engagement [with the North] on a large scale for one decade” under the Sunshine Policy, the North “played ROK aid at home as ‘gifts’ to its Great leaders from the weaker South, all the while keeping both hands in their southern brethren’s deep pockets.”

In Cha’s view, the Sunshine Policy was characterized by three traits. “First, it was supposed to be transformational, not transactional … It would be implemented not through a tit-for-tat negotiation … but through a wholesale change in South Korean policies toward the North that would change the conditions over time to change North Korean behavior permanently … Seoul would countenance a lack of reciprocity by the North, since decades of mistrust and animosity do not melt away immediately.” Second, “the Sunshine Policy was informed by a spirit of magnanimity, not maliciousness. It was based in a deeply held view that North Korea was not an inherently ‘evil’ country … but that its errant path was an accident of history.” Finally, Cha argues, “the Sunshine Policy was about generosity, not pedantry. It reflected a confidence that South Korea had won the post-war and Cold War competition that had started between the two regimes since 1948 … It was time for the winner to give rather than withhold.” Moon would not object to this interpretation. To him, the Sunshine Policy “aimed at realizing five major ideals.” First was “the absolute rejection of any war or major military conflicts on the Korean Peninsula.” Second, the policy strove to “achieve de facto unification,” since de jure or institutional unification would take much longer. Third, the policy was underpinned by “Kim Dae-jung’s belief that his policy of engagement and accommodation could bring about changes in North Korea and that its transformation into a normal state could offer decisive momentum for peaceful coexistence on the Korean Peninsula.”

Both books, I must hasten to stress, are broad in scope. Moon provides not only an in-depth analysis of the Sunshine Policy but also a penetrating account of the two inter-Korean summits—the first between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong Il in June 2000 and the second between Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong Il in October 2007. Additionally, Moon dissects what he sees as triple challenges to the Sunshine Policy—the policies of the Bush administration and the conservative government of President Lee Myung-bak, as well as the conflict and arms race between the two Koreas. Finally, Moon delves into the implications of the Sunshine Policy for “contending models of Korean unification,” and for “Northeast Asian Security dynamics.”

As one can surmise from both the title and the length of Cha’s book, his aim is much more ambitious: he seeks to provide an encyclopedic overview of North Korea with the aim of elucidating the manifold dimensions of North Korea’s behavior and structural characteristics. He also considers the prospects for Korean unification and offers a cautious prediction that the regime in Pyongyang is most likely to follow in the footsteps of the countries that have jettisoned their long-time dictators in an “Arab spring.”

While Moon expounds the “philosophical foun-
A major factor, in his view, is the movement of North Korean society “in the direction of greater marketization and economic entrepreneurship.” How should the outside world — in particular, South Korea and the US — deal with North Korea? Moon advocates engagement. He favors rescinding the sanctions that Seoul imposed on the North in response to a July 2008 incident in which a South Korean tourist was shot to death by North Korean soldiers when she apparently strayed into a restricted military zone in the North’s Kumgang Mountain resort; resumption of humanitarian assistance to the North; “reactivation of the Mt. Kumgang tourist project;” and implementation of existing agreements, including the two inter-Korean declarations issued after the 2000 and 2007 summits.

Cha, on the other hand, advocates both sanctions and negotiations. Sanctions, particularly financial sanctions, have proved their efficacy and should “continue to be the primary means of addressing the North’s vertical (development of own programs) and horizontal (selling to others) proliferation potential,” he argues. Cha is quick to add, however, that negotiations are equally important, for while “sanctions contain North Korea,” they do not “denuclearize North Korea.” In his opinion, the North will not give up its nuclear weapons, and Cha writes, have three objectives: “First, they aim for denuclearization.” “Second, [they] help to manage escalation and prevent crises.” And finally, “negotiations, if successfully concluded, will result in agreements that get incrementally at pieces of the nuclear program.”

Both authors devote a substantial amount of their respective books to unification. Moon examines “four contending scenarios of Korean unification — absorption, force, international trusteeship and consensus” — against the backdrop of “internal and external factors.” He identifies consensus as the most desirable and feasible scenario. It assumes the “continuation of a divided Korea for the time being and a series of negotiations between the two.” Even though, as Moon notes, both Koreas have repeatedly expressed their preference for this approach, the modes of unification each side has proposed have proved to be mutually incompatible. Take, for example, as Moon does, the North’s proposal for “the Democratic Confederal Republic of Koryo,” first unveiled in 1980, and the South’s proposal for a commonwealth or union of states reiterated since 1989.

Whereas the former is based on the formula of “one nation, one state, two systems,” the latter features “one nation, two transitional states, two local governments and two systems.”

The two Koreas differ sharply on how to handle state sovereignty. Moon points out. The “South has contended that the existing ideological and institutional heterogeneity between the two Koreas makes it too risky to create a unified state sovereignty through the instant merger of diplomatic representation and military command and control,” stressing that “formal unification cannot be achieved without first going through de facto unification” (emphasis added). On the other hand, he writes, the North “has rebuffed the South Korean proposal as a play to perpetuate national division and to eventually achieve unification by absorption through the gradual dissemination of liberal ideas of free markets and democracy.”

Moon argues that unification by consensus poses its three preconditions: “First, economic and social crises persist in the North, but not of an intensity that threatens the Kim Jong Un regime, and the North Korean leadership attempts to resolve them through major changes in policies and institutions.” Second, South Korea and the international community inclining the four major powers to recognize North Korea overcome its current economic crisis through a “soft landing” policy. Third, this thawing in its international standing precipitates North Korea to adopt an accommodative strategy as pragmatists rise in the ruling circle and the rigid codes of its Juche ideology are relaxed.”

These preconditions for unification by consensus, though ambitious, are by no means unattainable. Hence, the scenario remains viable or at least should not be dismissed as mere wishful thinking. Cha, on the other hand, discusses “soft landing” and “hard landing” as two possible paths to unification, arguing that the “unwritten purpose of the Sunshine Policy was... to avoid a hard landing.” In his view, however, what is most likely to happen will resemble a mixture of both: “not so hard as to cause mass calamity on the peninsula and the region, but not so soft as to make reunifying Korea and rebuilding the North a simple, straightforward task.”

The list of problems that Cha and another Korea expert, David Kang, have compiled merits attention. They believe that Seoul “will have to tackle” a number of policy priorities, and both “it and its regional partners will have to face ... potential problems.” First, the “short-term, immediate needs of the North Korean people” cry out for attention. The “initial emergency relief costs — of food, medical care, daily necessities and, in some cases, shelter — will at the very least total some $250 million per month and could reach as much as $1.25 billion.” Second, the “reconstitution of North Korea’s infrastructure” needs to be tackled, with transportation being a priority. (Having traveled by car from Pyongyang to Panmunjom as recently as 2007, I can testify that the roads in North Korea are in worse shape than anyone in the US or South Korea can envision.) Other infrastructure priorities include communications networks and the power and energy sectors. Additionally, Cha and Kang list “population control” — that is, dealing with the influx of North Korean refugees into the South — the “monetary union of North and South” and the “social aspects of unifying the Korean Peninsula,” of which “transitional justice” is one problem. For example, “How should a unified Korean government deal with the elites from the former North Korean regime?”

In sum, both books make distinct contributions to the literature on the two Koreas. They provide information and insights that anyone interested in Korean affairs and nuclear nonproliferation will find most useful, even eye-opening. Last but not least, Moon and Cha, notwithstanding their undisguised ideological proclivities, uphold the highest standards of scholarly integrity.