

Trump Declares ‘America First’ Policy a Success after Asia Trip

By MICHAEL D. SHEAR

WASHINGTON — President Trump boasted on Wednesday that nearly 10 months of his “America First” foreign policy had restored strength and respect to the United States on the world stage after years of what he called failed leadership under his predecessors.

Hours after returning home from a 12-day, five-country excursion to Asia with few concrete achievements, Mr. Trump made no significant announcements in a speech that he had hyped on Twitter as “a major statement” to be delivered upon his return.

Mr. Trump nonetheless declared the trip a resounding success, saying that he had made real progress by uniting the world against North Korea and insisting on reciprocal trade from Asian nations.

“America’s renewed confidence and standing in the world has never been stronger than it is right now,” he said. “This is exactly what the world saw: a strong, proud and confident America.”

The speech also provided a made-for-Twitter moment in which a clearly parched president interrupted his broadcast to reach for a bottle of water, struggling until an aide told him where to look. And when he finished speaking, Mr. Trump ignored questions from journalists seeking comment on the sexual assault scandal swirling around Roy S. Moore of Alabama, the Republican nominee for Senate in a special election next month.

Announced with little notice and delivered midafternoon from the Diplomatic Room of the White House, the president’s speech was designed to be what his critics have never offered him: a sweeping and positive assessment of his own performance as the nation’s commander in chief and top diplomat.

By recounting his travels and detailing the just completed Asia trip, Mr. Trump sought to make the case that the United States was once again playing a leading role in the world.

“My fellow citizens, America is back, and the future has never looked brighter,” he said.

Critics say Mr. Trump has abandoned the United States’ status as a global superpower by retreating from trade agreements and backing out of the Paris climate accord. The

president's political rivals accuse him of straining relationships with allies in NATO and elsewhere while embracing despots, including President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.

“He is so easily played by foreign leaders, so transparently susceptible to flattery,” said Eliot A. Cohen, one of Mr. Trump’s harshest critics and a former adviser to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. “It clearly has undermined the reputation of the United States, the credibility of the United States.”

Before delivering the speech, Mr. Trump appeared to be annoyed by criticism of his foreign policy, saying on Twitter that “the failing @nytimes hates the fact that I have developed a great relationship with World leaders like Xi Jinping, President of China.” He added that “these relationships are a good thing, not a bad thing. The U.S. is being respected again. Watch Trade!”

The tweet raised anticipation that Mr. Trump planned a big announcement on trade. Instead, asserted on Wednesday that “everywhere we went,” he and the American delegation was met with “incredible warmth, hospitality and, most importantly, respect” from world leaders of other nations.

Casting the Asia trip as the culmination of a year of accomplishments, Mr. Trump noted his efforts in the spring, during a trip to Saudi Arabia, to rally Arab and Muslim nations to fight financing of terrorism. He boasted that his tough talk with NATO allies has led those longtime partners to increase their commitments to the common defense of the alliance. And he revisited his call — made during a speech in Warsaw — for a defense of Western civilization.

“To each of these places, I have carried our vision for a better — a vision for something stronger and sovereign — so important — sovereign and independent nations, rooted in their histories, confident in their destinies, and cooperating together to advance their security, prosperity and the noble cause of peace,” Mr. Trump said.

In talking about his foreign policy achievements, Mr. Trump has often bragged about the personal relationships he has forged with his counterparts in China, the Middle East and elsewhere.

In Wednesday’s speech, Mr. Trump hoped to highlight what his advisers said were three successes from his just-concluded trip to South Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam and the Philippines: attempts to unite opposition to North Korea’s nuclear ambitions; to strengthen economic alliances; and to insist on fair trade.

John D. Negroponte, who served as deputy secretary of state under President George W. Bush, said Mr. Trump should get credit, both for developing relationships with his counterparts and for effectively delivering a tough message toward North Korea.

“I thought he handled that very well, with friend and adversary alike,” Mr. Negroponte, who also served as the director of national intelligence, said after the speech.

Critics of Mr. Trump's foreign policy have hammered the president for his use of childish names for Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader. They say Mr. Trump has deepened the possibility of a nuclear crisis, not reduced tensions. And some say Mr. Trump's retreat from the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement has robbed the United States of influence in the region.

In fact, Mr. Trump ended his Asia trip without appearing to conclude any of the one-on-one trade deals with individual nations that he often has said would be the hallmark of his administration.

"The big question mark remains: Does he have an economic strategy toward the East Asian region?" Mr. Negroponte said. "You withdraw from the TPP and say 'America First.' I notice no one is getting in line to make unilateral deals."

In his remarks, Mr. Trump mentioned the World Trade Organization and asserted that the 21 leaders he met with during summit meetings in Asia "recognized the need to address unfair trade practices, and acknowledged that the W.T.O. is in strong need of reform."

In fact, many of the other leaders at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit meeting endorsed the World Trade Organization and made progress on finalizing the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement without the participation of the United States.

Mr. Trump did make a point of saying that "no one owns the ocean," a reference to the long-running and tense dispute in East Asia about China's efforts to control access to the South China Sea. "Freedom of navigation and overflight are critical to the security and prosperity of all nations," he said.

But Mr. Trump did not single out China for criticism, continuing a pattern of soft-pedaling on a dispute that could annoy United States allies.

Despite that, Mr. Trump hoped his speech would galvanize public opinion behind the idea that his leadership on foreign policy was restoring a new sense of optimism about the United States around the world.

"A president is entitled to proclaim a sunny day while everyone else is huddling under their umbrellas," said Philip Zelikow, who served as a diplomat and foreign policy adviser in several Republican administrations.